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Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England

JEAN E. HOWARD

HOW MANY PEOPLE CROSSDRESSED IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND? There is probably no way empirically to answer such a question. Given Biblical prohibitions against the practice and their frequent repetition from the pulpit and in the prescriptive literature of the period, one would guess that the number of people who dared walk the streets of London in the clothes of the other sex was limited. Nonetheless, there *are* records of women, in particular, who did so, and who were punished for their audacity; and from at least 1580 to 1620 preachers and polemicists kept up a steady attack on the practice. I am going to argue that the polemics signal a sex-gender system under pressure and that crossdressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike.¹ I will also argue, however, that the subversive or transgressive potential of this practice could be and was recuperated in a number of ways. As with any social practice, its meaning varied with the circumstances of its occurrence, with the particulars of the institutional or cultural sites of its enactment, and with the class position of the transgressor. As part of a stage action, for example, the ideological import of crossdressing was mediated by all the conventions of dramatic narrative and Renaissance dramatic production. It cannot simply be conflated with crossdressing on the London streets or as part of a disciplining ritual such as a charivari or skimmington. In what follows I want to pay attention to the *differences* among various manifestations of crossdressing in Renaissance culture but at the same time to suggest the ways they form an interlocking grid through which we can read aspects of class and gender struggle in the period, struggles in which the theatre—as I hope to show—played a highly contradictory role.

Inevitably, such readings of the past as I am about to undertake are motivated by present concerns and involve taking a position within present critical debates.² Recently, discussions of crossdressing on the Renaissance stage have

¹ For the idea of the sex-gender system, see Gayle Rubin's important essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210.

² As Louis Montrose argues, speaking of new forms of historical inquiry: "Integral to this new project of historical criticism is . . . a recognition of the agency of criticism in constructing and delimiting the subject of study, and of the historical positioning of the critic vis-à-vis that subject" ("Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 [1986], 5-12, esp. p. 7). Clearly, my investments in contemporary feminism have shaped the focus

become an important site for talking about the Renaissance sex-gender system in general and about the possibilities of transgressing or subverting that system.³ Several questions are at issue. First, was crossdressing by male actors merely an unremarkable convention within Renaissance dramatic practice; was it a scandal, a source of homoerotic attraction, or an inevitable extension of a sex-gender system in which there was only one sex and that one sex male? Second, were women who crossdressed—in life or in dramatic fables—successfully challenging patriarchal domination, or were they serving its ends? In this paper I will enter these debates in part by arguing against those readings of the Renaissance sex-gender system that erase signs of gender struggle, in part by arguing that one should not concede in advance the power of patriarchal structures to contain or recuperate threats to their authority. Positioning myself within materialist feminism, I suggest that contradictions within the social formation enabled opposition to and modification of certain forms of patriarchal domination, and that struggle, resistance, and subversive masquerade are terms as important as recuperation and containment in analyzing Renaissance gender relations and female crossdressing in particular.⁴

of the present essay, which is an attempt to contribute to the collective project of making intelligible a gender system in many ways quite different from our own and yet one in large measure having the similar political effect of women's subordination and exploitation.

³ In regard to boys playing women's roles, cf. Laura Levine ("Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642," *Criticism*, 28 [1986], 121–43), who argues that this practice brought to the surface deep-seated fears that the self was not stable and fixed but unstable and monstrous and infinitely malleable unless strictly controlled. Behind the repeated protestations that the boy actors will be made effeminate by wearing women's clothing, she argues, lies the fear they will be found to have no essential being. By contrast, Stephen Greenblatt argues that an all-male acting troupe was the natural and unremarkable product of a culture whose conception of gender was "teleologically male" ("Fiction and Friction," in *Shakespearean Negotiations* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], pp. 66–93, esp. p. 88). Lisa Jardine ("As boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour": Female Roles and Elizabethan Eroticism," *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* [Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983], pp. 9–36) sees the Renaissance public theatre as in large measure designed for the gratification of male spectators and argues that in many cases it was homoerotic passion that the boy actors aroused in their male audience. Kathleen McLuskie ("The Act, the Role, and the Actor: Boy Actresses on the Elizabethan Stage," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3 [1987], 120–30) in effect critiques this position by arguing that it collapses theatrical practice with real life and that in performance the sex of the actor is irrelevant and, on the Renaissance stage, conventional. A similar divergence of opinion characterizes scholarship on the presence of crossdressing in dramatic works of the period. Juliet Dusinberre, for example, argues that plays of crossdressing were sites where the freedom of women to play with gender identity was explored (*Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* [New York: Macmillan, 1975], pp. 231–71), while Clara Claiborne Park suggests that women who crossdress in these scripts doff their disguises willingly, providing the—to men—gratifying spectacle of spunky women who voluntarily tame themselves to suit male expectations ("As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980], pp. 100–16). Phyllis Rackin and Catherine Belsey both argue that at least in some instances crossdressing on the stage opens up the possibility of revealing the plurality and fluidity and cultural-constructedness of gender, thus toppling the essentialist binarism that was used to hold women in an inferior place (Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," *PMLA*, 102 [1987], 29–41, and Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis [London: Methuen, 1985], pp. 166–90).

⁴ Materialist or socialist feminism, better known in Britain than in the United States, assumes that gender differences are culturally constructed and historically specific, rather than innate, and that the hierarchical gender systems based on these differences can therefore be changed. Materialist feminists also recognize the plural nature of woman, i.e., that factors such as class and race forbid

It is clear that crossdressing in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods caused controversy. At the far end of the era I am going to examine—that is, around 1620—James I ordered the preachers of London to inveigh from the pulpit against the practice of women dressing mannishly in the streets of London. That year also saw the publication of the two polemical tracts *Hic Mulier* and *Haec-Vir*, which respectively attack and defend crossdressing and which suggest that it had become a practice taken up with special enthusiasm by the fashion-mongering wives of the City who are accused of transgressing both class and gender boundaries.⁵ By wearing ever more ornate clothing, they encroached on the privileges of aristocratic women; by wearing men's clothing they encroached on the privileges of the advantaged sex. Much earlier, during the reign of Elizabeth, the antitheatrical tracts had attacked crossdressing by boy actors, and often these attacks spilled over, as I will discuss, into attacks on women who dressed mannishly. Social commentators such as William Harrison in his *The Description of England* regularly railed against the decline of modesty and decorum in dress, and Harrison ends his diatribe against improperly dressed women by remarking that "I have met with some of these trulls in London so disguised that it hath passed my skill to discern whether they were men or women."⁶ The word "trull" is important. The *OED* defines "trull" as "a low prostitute, or concubine; a drab, strumpet, trollop." Harrison's diction links the mannish woman with prostitution, and there were strong discursive linkages throughout the period between female crossdressing and the threat of female sexual incontinence.

By examining records from Bridewell and the Aldermen's Court between about 1565 and 1605, R. Mark Benbow has indeed found that many of the women apprehended in men's clothing during the period were accused of prostitution.⁷ For example, on 3 July 1575, the Aldermen's Court records report that one Dorothy Clayton, spinster, "contrary to all honesty and womanhood commonly goes about the City apparelled in man's atire. She has abused her body with sundry persons and lived an incontinent life. On Friday she is to stand on the pillory for two hours in men's apparell and then to be sent to Bridewell until further order" (Repertory of the Aldermen's Court, no. 19, p. 93). Of Margaret Wakeley in 1601 the Bridewell Records read: "[She] had a bastard child and went in man's apparell" (Bridewell Court Minute Book 4, p. 207). Of other women it was simply said that they were apprehended dressed as men, though clearly the suspicion was that any woman so apprehended prob-

women sharing an easy "sisterhood." This suggests the undesirability of analyzing the gender system in isolation from other systematic modalities of oppression. For a brief introduction to materialist feminism, see "Toward a Materialist-feminist Criticism," *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. xv–xxxix. For an indication of the usefulness of materialist feminism to the analysis of drama, see "Materialist Feminism and Theatre" in Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 82–94. For a more complicated account of the history of materialist feminism, its relation to other feminisms, and the conceptual problems it presently faces, see Gail Omvedt's "'Patriarchy': The Analysis of Women's Oppression," *The Insurgent Sociologist*, 13 (1986), 30–50.

⁵ *Hic Mulier or The Man-Woman* (London, 1620), esp. B4^v–C.

⁶ William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (1587; rpt. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), p. 147.

⁷ I am extremely grateful to Professor Benbow for sharing his research with me. The following material is taken from his transcription of records from the Repertories of the Aldermen's Court in the London City Record Office and from the Bridewell Court Minute Books between approximately 1565 and 1605.

ably led a loose life. One woman, Johanna Goodman, was whipped and sent to Bridewell in 1569 simply for dressing as a male servant so that she could accompany her soldier-husband to war (Aldermen's Court, no. 16, p. 522). It is impossible to tell the "class" position of many of these women.⁸ Most appear to be unmarried women of the serving class eking out a precarious living in London. Some are recorded as being "in service" to various London tavern-keepers and tradesmen; some may have worn male clothing for protection in travelling about in the city; some may have been driven to prostitution by economic necessity, with their crossdressed apparel becoming a demonized "sign" of their enforced sexual availability. It is tempting to speculate that if citizen wives of the Jacobean period assumed men's clothes as a sign of their wealth and independence, lower-class women may well have assumed them from a sense of vulnerability, with an eventual turn to prostitution merely marking the extent of that vulnerability.

That actual women of several social classes *did* crossdress in Renaissance England is an important fact, but equally important is how their behavior was ideologically processed or rendered intelligible in the discourses of the time. Specifically, what made adopting the dress of the other sex so transgressive that lower-class women were pilloried and whipped and merchant wives were harangued from the pulpit for doing it? For the most general answer, one can begin by stating that crossdressing, like other disruptions of the Renaissance semiotics of dress, opened a gap between the supposed reality of one's social station and sexual kind and the clothes that were to display that reality to the world. As is well known, the state regulated dress in early modern England, especially in urban settings, precisely to keep people in the social "places" to which they were born. Elizabethan sumptuary proclamations list those who could wear certain colors (such as purple), certain fabrics (such as silk), and certain adornments (such as spurs, daggers, jewels).⁹ In myriad ways clothes distinguished one social group from those both above and below; they were precise indicators of status and degree. To transgress the codes governing dress was to disrupt an official view of the social order in which one's identity was largely determined by one's station or degree—and where that station was, in theory, providentially determined and immutable.

⁸ As Leonard Tennenhouse pointed out in an astute critique of this paper, class categories derived from nineteenth-century culture are in some degree anachronistically imposed on the Renaissance social formation, which was, in part, simply a two-class culture with a tiny but powerful privileged group composed of gentry and aristocracy poised above an undifferentiated mass of laboring "others." Yet social historians of the period increasingly speak of the clash in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries between emergent capitalistic social relations and older modes of social organization based on status or degree. Especially in London, the emergence of an entrepreneurial middle class, "the middling sort," seems an established fact by 1600, and to some degree enclosure movements, the putting-out system of cloth manufacture, and changes in agricultural practice were creating a rural proletariat dependent on wage labor for subsistence and creating that pool of "vagabonds and masterless men" so feared by the Elizabethan authorities. For discussions of class and status structures in this period, see David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Lawrence Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700," *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), 16–55; Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1982), and Barry Reay, *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985). See also David Harris Sacks, "Searching for 'Culture' in the English Renaissance," in this issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

⁹ See Wilfred Hooper, "The Tudor Sumptuary Laws," *English Historical Review*, XXX (1915), 433–49.

Of course, as social historians such as Lawrence Stone, Keith Wrightson, Barry Reay, and David Underdown have argued, this view of the social order was under enormous pressure (see note 8). Social mobility was a fact, its effects strikingly clear in an urban center such as London, and economic and cultural changes were creating tensions between a social order based on hierarchy and deference and one increasingly based on entrepreneurship and the social relations attendant upon the emergence of early capitalism. In general, official social ideologies did not acknowledge such changes. Rather, enormous energy was devoted to revealing the "monstrous" nature of those who moved out of their places.¹⁰

Dress, as a highly regulated semiotic system, became a primary site where a struggle over the mutability of the social order was conducted. Thus, Phillip Stubbes begins his *Anatomie of Abuses* of 1583 with an analysis of apparel. For Stubbes transgressions of the dress code don't just *signal* social disruption; they constitute such disruption. That is, when common subjects wear the gold, silk, and diamonds that properly signify an aristocratic birth and calling (as apparently a number did), they demean the social place they have usurped and erase necessary social distinctions. As Stubbes writes in his famous attack on social climbers: "there is such a confuse mingle mangle of apparell in Ailgna, and such preposterous excesse therof, as every one is permitted to flaunt it out, in what apparell he lust himselfe, or can get by anie kind of meanes. So that it is verie hard to knowe, who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a gentleman, who is not."¹¹ In short, when rules of apparel are violated, class distinctions break down.

Crucially for my argument, Stubbes also says that when women dress as men and when men dress effeminately, distinctions between sexual "kinds" are also obliterated. The stability of the social order depends as much on maintaining absolute distinctions between male and female as between aristocrat and yeoman. Stubbes says: "Our Apparell was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde" (F5^v). In *Hic Mulier* the crossdressed woman is enjoined to "Remember how your Maker made for our first Parents coates, not one coat, but a coat for the man, and a coat for the woman; coates of seuerall fashions, seuerall formes, and for seuerall uses: the mans coat fit for his labour, the womans fit for her modestie" (B2^v-B3). To switch coats is to undo the work of heaven.

Stephen Greenblatt has recently argued that modern notions of sexual difference originate later than the Renaissance and that in at least some Renaissance discourses there appears to be only one sex, women being but imperfectly formed or incomplete men. Greenblatt then goes on to argue that a transvestite theatre was a natural, indeed, almost an inevitable, product of such a culture.¹² In contrast, the writings of Stubbes and the other antitheatrical polemicists suggest that a transvestite theatre could also be read, in the Renaissance, as *unnatural*, as a transgression of a divinely sanctioned social order. What are we to make of this seeming contradiction? First, it suggests the need to recognize the plurality of discourses about gender in the Renaissance. If dominant medical

¹⁰ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 31-33.

¹¹ *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London: Richard Jones, 1583), C2^v.

¹² Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 88.

discourses such as those cited by Greenblatt saw only male genitalia in both men and women and so, in some sense, authorized the view that there was only one sex, the Bible provided authority, seized by Stubbes, for a two-sex gender system: "Male and female created He them" (Genesis 1:27). In some discourses masculine and feminine identity *were* seen as points on a continuum, not separate essences, but in works such as the antitheatrical tracts the language of two kinds predominates, and the injunction from Deuteronomy against wearing the clothes of the other sex is repeated with tiresome frequency.

I think the real point is that the Renaissance needed the idea of two genders, one subordinate to the other, to provide a key element in its hierarchical view of the social order and to buttress its gendered division of labor. The interesting possibility raised by Greenblatt's work is that, in the Renaissance, gender differences may not always or necessarily have been built upon a self-evident notion of biological sexual difference as was to be true in the nineteenth century.¹³ This simply means that gender difference and hierarchy had to be produced and secured—through ideological interpellation when possible, through force when necessary—on other grounds. If women were not invariably depicted as anatomically different from men in an essential way, they could still be seen as different merely by virtue of their lack of masculine perfection (softer, weaker, less hot), and their subordination could be justified on those grounds. Then, as now, gender relations, however eroticized, were relations of power, produced and held in place through enormous cultural labor in the interests of the dominant gender. In the early modern period the regulation of dress was part of this apparatus for producing and marking gender difference, though cultural shifts were occurring. As I will suggest later in this essay, with the emergence of the bourgeois subject, whose essence is defined by his or her interiority, less emphasis was to fall on inscribing gender difference solely on the outside of the body through apparel; rather, the marks of gender difference were to be worn inwardly and made manifest through a properly gendered subjectivity.

Catherine MacKinnon has argued that the modern emphasis on sexual difference—as used to justify separate and unequal spheres of work and experience—has obscured the political realities of domination and exploitation that have continued to regulate relations between the genders.¹⁴ By contrast, writers and speakers in the Renaissance were forthright about man's proper domination of women. Discourses of gender in the Renaissance were overwhelmingly hierarchical, with men and women first and foremost described, respectively, as dominant and subservient, perfect and less perfect, fit for rule and unfit for rule. Behind general assertions of man's proper lordship over woman lay standard appeals to differences between men and women's capacities to reason, to control passion, etc. In short, languages of difference—though not necessarily biological, anatomical difference—were useful for underpinning sexual hierarchy. Keeping that hierarchy in place was an ongoing struggle, and as with conflicts over social mobility, gender struggles were in part played out on the terrain of dress.

Disruptions of the semiotics of dress by men and by women were not, however, read in the same way. For a man, wearing women's dress undermined

¹³ Behind Greenblatt's essay stands the work of Thomas Laqueur, particularly his important essay, "Orgasm, Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," *Representations*, 14 (1986), 1–41.

¹⁴ *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), esp. "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," pp. 32–45.

the authority inherently belonging to the superior sex and placed him in a position of shame. At the simplest level, wearing effeminately ornate clothes would, in Stubbes's words, make men "weake, tender and infirme, not able to abide such sharp conflicts and blustering stormes" as their forefathers had endured.¹⁵ At a more serious level, men actually wearing women's clothes, and not just ornate apparel, are so thoroughly "out of place" that they become monstrous. And in the antitheatrical tracts, as in the polemical attacks on effeminate Catholic priests, whose vestments were seen as a kind of female clothing, this monstrosity is figured as sexual perversion.¹⁶ Sodomy haunts the fringes of Stubbes's text.¹⁷ A man, and especially a boy, who theatricalizes the self as female, invites playing the woman's part in sexual congress. For a man this is shameful, as is the carrying of the distaff and the wearing of female dress by defeated or women-mastered warriors from Artegal to Antony. In comic form we see this in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Falstaff assumes the clothes of the Wise Woman of Brainford and is roundly beaten by the misogynist Ford.

For women the significance of crossdressing is different. In the polemical literature women who crossdressed were less often accused of sexual perversion than of sexual incontinence, of being whores. This was in part because the discursive construction of woman in the Renaissance involved seeing her as a creature of strong sexual appetites needing strict regulation. Her sexual desire was both a mark of her inferiority and a justification for her control by men. As Peter Stallybrass has argued, discipline and control of woman's body were central patriarchal preoccupations.¹⁸ The orifices of that body were to be policed, the body's actions circumscribed. Women who gadded about outside the home or who talked too much (by male standards) were suspected of being whores—both the open door and the open mouth signifying sexual incontinence. The good woman was closed off: silent, chaste, and immured within the home. As Edmund Tilney asserted in a piece of advice that quickly became a Renaissance commonplace, the best way for a woman to keep a good name was for her never to leave her house.¹⁹ When women took men's clothes, they symbolically left their subordinate positions. They became masterless women, and this threatened overthrow of hierarchy was discursively read as the eruption of uncontrolled sexuality.

The *Hic Mulier* tract of 1620 presents most clearly this particular construction of the crossdressed woman and the kinds of repression it elicited. Predictably, crossdressed women are accused in the tract of excessive sexual appetite. With their short waists and French doublets "all unbutton'd to entice," they "give a most easie way to every luxurious action" (A4^v). Along with giving over

¹⁵ *The Anatomie of Abuses*, E. As Norbert Elias and others have noted, here we witness the highly mediated repercussions of the transition from a feudal culture, in which military prowess was required of the ruling orders, to a courtier culture, in which the arts of civility and social negotiation are more urgent. See *The History of Manners*, Vol. I of *The Civilizing Process*, 2 vols. (1939; rpt. New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁶ For a venomous attack on the theatricality of the Catholic Mass and the sexual perversions encouraged by the wearing of ornate vestments by lewd priests, see Thomas Becon, *The Displaying of the Popish Masse* (London, 1637), esp. pp. 73–75.

¹⁷ See Levine, pp. 134–35 (cited in note 3, above).

¹⁸ "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 123–42.

¹⁹ *A briefe and pleasant discourse of duties in Mariage, called the Flower of Friendship* (London, 1587), E2^v–E3.

their long hair and their sewing needles, they have given over modesty, silence, and chastity. Moreover, such women signal not only the breakdown of the hierarchical gender system, but of the class system as well. The author calls them “bu[t] ragges of Gentry,” “the adulterate branches of rich Stocks,” and “this deformitie all base, all barbarous” (B). The mannish woman not only produces bastards but is one herself, and she threatens the collapse of the entire class system. The very state is represented as threatened by her behavior. The author writes: “If this [crossdressing] bee not barbarous, make the rude *Scythian*, the untamed *Moore*, the naked *Indian*, or the wilde *Irish*, Lords and Rulers of well gouerned Cities” (B^v). In a stunning revelation of a racial and national chauvinism, the aspiration of women beyond their place is associated with the monstrous notion of the black in rulership over the white, the Irish over the English. Such consequences—though imagined only—invite reprisal. Predictably, what is evoked at the end is the power of the state and of the patriarch within the family to quell woman’s unruliness. The author wants the “powerfull Statute of apparell [to] lift vp his Battle-Axe, and crush the offenders in pieces, so as euery one may bee knowne by the true badge of their bloud, or Fortune” (C^v). For when women “catch the bridle in their teeth, and runne away with their Rulers, they care not into what dangers they plunge either their Fortunes or Reputations” (C2); consequently, those who are “Fathers, Husbands, or Sustainers of these new *Hermaphrodites*” (C2^v) must keep them in order, forbid the buying of such outrageous apparel, and instruct them in the virtues which are women’s best ornaments. It is important to remember that for the lower-class woman who found herself in the Aldermen’s Court, it was not just a husband’s chastisement but the whip, pillory, and prisons of the state’s repressive apparatuses that constituted her as a guilty subject and effected her punishment.

I suggest that these worries about the unruly crossdressed woman, as well as the various means of control devised to contain the threat she constituted, are signs—as Karen Newman, Catherine Belsey, and others have indicated—that early modern England was not only permeated by well-documented social mobility and unsettling economic change, but by considerable instability in the gender system as well.²⁰ Social historians have found that in some areas, particularly where economic change was most rapid and changes in family form most pronounced, the disciplining and restraint of women increased during this period, sometimes taking the form of an increased regulation of women’s sexuality. Martin Ingram has argued, for example, that the period 1580–1620 witnessed an increase in the prosecution of prenuptial pregnancies and an increasing preoccupation with the strains that bastards placed on the commonweal.²¹ By 1620 it was common, as it had not been before, for a woman who produced a bastard to be jailed for up to a year.²²

But not all the disciplining of women went on through the ecclesiastical or civil courts. Charivaris, skimmingtons, or rough ridings were communal rituals

²⁰ Newman, “Renaissance Family Politics and Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *ELR*, 16 (1986), 86–100, esp. pp. 91–92. Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), esp. pp. 129–221.

²¹ “The Reform of Popular Culture? Sex and Marriage in Early Modern England,” *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Barry Reay (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), pp. 129–65, esp. p. 148.

²² Ingram, “The Reform of Popular Culture? Sex and Marriage in Early Modern England,” p. 155.

through which unruly women were disciplined and insufficiently dominating husbands reprov'd.²³ The charivari specifically punished a woman's violation of her place in the gender hierarchy. Sometimes she had merely "worn the breeches" in the sense of ordering her husband about; sometimes she was accused of beating her spouse, sometimes of having made him a cuckold. In the punishment of those guilty of female dominance, the couple's inversion of gender hierarchy was mirrored by having the husband ride backward on a horse through the town while neighbors played cacophonous music. Husband-beating was specifically punished by having the husband or his substitute hold a distaff while riding backward on a horse, while a woman figure, a Lady Skimington (often a man dressed as a woman), beat him with the ladle used for making butter and cheese. These ritual punishments were all ways of registering the fact that important cultural boundaries had been erased, important social hierarchies disrupted, by the offending parties. Similarly, women who talked too much, who were "scolds," were put upon a cucking stool and dunked in water to stop the incontinence of the mouth.

David Underdown has argued that there was a marked increase in the years immediately after 1600 in charivaris and uses of the cucking stool, especially in communities where traditional modes of ordering society along vertical lines of hierarchy, deference, and paternalism were being disrupted and displaced by what we associate with the more modern horizontal alignment of people within classes and with the rise of protocapitalist economic practices.²⁴ For example, the upland wood and pasture areas of the west counties, where there was a strong influx of migrant labor, where families were dispersed and where capitalism had penetrated in terms of the heavy reliance on the putting-out system of cloth manufacture, evidenced more occurrences of charivaries, etc., than did the more centralized village communities of the grain-growing valleys where the population was more stable, families less isolated, and the pace of social change less rapid. Cities were another site of gender tension, in part because they uprooted people from traditional social structures. As many have noted, in times of general social dislocation, fears about change are often displaced onto women.²⁵ Cities also created new and unsettling positions for women (middle-class women, in particular) to occupy: positions as consumers of urban pleasures such as theatregoing and of the commodities produced by English trade and manufacture; positions of economic power as widows of merchants or as visible workers in their husbands' shops.²⁶ A foreign visitor to London, Thomas Platter, noted in 1599 how much freedom English women had vis-à-

²³ For discussion of these disciplining rituals, see Martin Ingram, "Ridings, Rough Music and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England" in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Barry Reay, pp. 166-97; David Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England" in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, eds. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 116-36; and Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe" in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. Barbara Babcock (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 147-90.

²⁴ See Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold," esp. pp. 125-35; for the expanded version of his argument, see *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*.

²⁵ For a general statement of this argument in regard to the Renaissance, see Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*, esp. p. 162.

²⁶ See Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

vis their continental counterparts.²⁷ But this freedom, I have been arguing, was unsettling to the patriarchal order. The calls at the end of *Hic Mulier* for the reining in of women's freedom are but one sign of just how unsettling change in the sex-gender system had become.

Ironically, and this seems to me a chief point to remember, if the vast social changes of the period led to intensified pressures on women and a strengthening of patriarchal authority in the family and the state, these changes also produced sites of resistance and possibilities of new powers for women. I do not mean to contest the view, which I believe is essentially correct, that the English Renaissance was no real Renaissance for women—i.e., it was not for most women a time of increased freedom from patriarchal oppression and exploitation.²⁸ Yet I want to argue that a dialectical view of history may enable us to attend not only to the success of dominant groups in controlling the social field but also to their failures and to the myriad ways in which subaltern and marginal groups contest hegemonic impositions.²⁹ If every cultural site is a site of social struggle, attention to the specifics of that struggle may reveal the lapses and contradictions of power that produce social change. Thus, even if, as has been argued, the invention of printing and the admittedly slow increase in women's literacy in the early modern period in part simply increased the ways in which women could be controlled and interpellated as good subjects of a patriarchal order (witness the outpouring of books on housewifery and female piety after the 1580s as documented by Suzanne Hull³⁰), nonetheless skills in reading and writing allowed some women access to some authorities (such as scripture) and to some technologies (such as print), which allowed them to begin

²⁷ Quoted in Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941), pp. 76–77.

²⁸ I think it is as yet impossible to give a definitive answer to Joan Kelly's famous question "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" (*Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984], pp. 19–50. If Juliet Dusinberre's account (*Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*) of the freedoms opening up for middle-class women in the Renaissance seems to take too little account of the recuperative powers of patriarchal systems, Lawrence Stone's more sober account (*The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* [New York: Harper and Row, 1977]) of the intensification of patriarchy toward the end of the sixteenth century, especially among the upper classes, tends simply to assign to patriarchy the absolute power it claimed for itself and to ignore the possibilities for women's resistance, which it has been the work of feminist scholars such as Catherine Belsey (*The Subject of Tragedy*, esp. pp. 129–221) and others to explore. We know that the gender system *changed* in the Renaissance as new family structures emerged, as patterns of work and production changed, etc.; but change does not necessarily mean progress or the amelioration of oppression. Feminist scholarship is in the process of discovering where these changes enabled instances of resistance and female empowerment, as well as the many ways in which change simply meant the old oppression in new guises.

²⁹ In the wake of Althusser's writings on ideology (see, for example, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971], pp. 127–86) much emphasis in cultural analysis fell on the success of various apparatuses in interpellating subjects within dominant ideologies. Such an emphasis allowed little latitude for theorizing change or resistance. As a corrective it is important to emphasize what Althusser states but does not develop: namely, that "ideological state apparatuses" are not only the stake but the site of class struggle (p. 147) and that resistance occurs within them; and to make use of Gramsci's work on the way subaltern groups contest hegemonic ideological practices (see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quinten Hoare and Geoffrey Smith [New York: International Publishers, 1971]). For a useful overview of contemporary views of ideology, see Terry E. Boswell et al., "Recent Developments in Marxist Theories of Ideology," *Insurgent Sociologist*, 13 (1986), 5–22.

³⁰ *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475–1640* (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library, 1982).

to rewrite their inscriptions within patriarchy. Many scholars, following on the work of William and Malleville Haller, have noted the contradictions in Protestant marriage theory.³¹ Chiefly a means for making the home the center of patriarchal control and for instantiating the wife within the domestic sphere, this theory nonetheless stresses the wife's importance within that sphere and her spiritual equality with her husband. This calls into question the inevitability of starkly hierarchical theories of gender and opens space for ideas of negotiation, mutuality, and contract between husband and wife, some of which mutuality we may sense being worked out in Shakespeare's romantic comedies.³²

All of this, I think, bears on how we are to evaluate the various forms of crossdressing detailed earlier in this paper. In a period of social dislocation in which the sex-gender system was one of the major sites of anxiety and change, female crossdressing in any context had the *potential* to raise fears about women wearing the breeches and undermining the hierarchical social order. In the *Haec-Vir* tract the mannish woman declares that not nature but custom dictates women's dress and women's subservient place in society and that, moreover, "*Custom* is an idiot."³³ No matter that the tract changes direction and ends up with the familiar plea that if men would be more mannish, women would return to their accustomed role; the fact remains that through the discussion of women's dress has come an attack on the naturalness of the whole gender system.

The subversive potential of women dressed as men was self-consciously exploited in other cultural contexts as well. Natalie Davis has documented that crossdressed figures were prominent both in carnival—where gender and class boundaries were simultaneously tested and confirmed—and in food riots, demonstrations against enclosures, and other forms of lower-class protest.³⁴ Sometimes in such activities men performed as Lady Skimingtons, appropriating the powerful iconography of the unruly woman to protest the unequal distribution of power and material goods within the social order.³⁵ Clearly, crossdressing had enormous symbolic significance, and the state had an interest in controlling it. Witness James I's injunction to the preachers of London that they preach against the practice. The question I want to address in the remainder of this essay concerns the role of the theatre in gender definition. Did the theatre, for example, with its many fables of crossdressing, also form part of the cultural apparatus for policing gender boundaries, or did it serve as a site for their further disturbance? If women off the stage seized the language of dress to act out transgressions of the sex-gender system, did the theatre effectively co-opt this transgression by transforming it into fictions that depoliticized the practice? Or was the theatre in some sense an agent of cultural transformation, helping to create new subject positions and gender relations for men and women in a period of rapid social change? And how did the all-male mode of dramatic produc-

³¹ Cf. William and Malleville Haller, "The Puritan Art of Love," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 5 (1941-42), 235-72.

³² For an important study of the juxtaposition of patriarchal absolutism and contractual theories of state and family relations, see Gordon Schochet's *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes, Especially in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975). For a fascinating examination of how Restoration drama embodies these changing ideologies of marriage and authority, see Susan Staves's *Players' Scepters: Fictions of Authority in the Restoration* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1979).

³³ *Haec-Vir or The Womanish-Man* (London, 1620), B2^v.

³⁴ Davis, "Women on Top," pp. 154-55 and 176-83.

³⁵ Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586-1660* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 5.

tion—the fact of crossdressing as a daily part of dramatic practice—affect the ideological import of these fictions of crossdressing?

I will start by stating the obvious: that most Renaissance plays that depict crossdressing, with the exception of a few works such as *The Roaring Girl*, do not in any direct way constitute “comments” on the crossdressing debates. The plays are not topical in that way, and in employing crossdressing motifs they are using a staple of comic tradition with a long dramatic lineage. Nonetheless I contend that many of the crossdressing plays I have examined are intensely preoccupied with threats to, disruptions of, the sex-gender system. Collectively they play a role in producing and managing anxieties about women on top, women who are not “in their places,” but are gadding, gossiping, and engaging—it is assumed—in extramarital sex, and in managing anxieties about the fragility of male authority. Moreover, while the thrust of many of these plays is toward containing threats to the traditional sex-gender system, this is not uniformly so. The plays are themselves sites of social struggle conducted through discourse, and they were produced in a cultural institution that was itself controversial and ideologically volatile. Not surprisingly, the ideological implications of plays that feature crossdressing vary markedly.

At one extreme, consider *Epicoene*. This is a play saturated with the fear of women who have moved or might move from their proper place of subordination, and it points to some of the changing social conditions that made such movement a possibility and a threat. Specifically, the play, set in contemporary London and produced in 1608 for the boy company at Whitefriars, shows how the emerging metropolis offers new opportunities for women to be other than chaste, silent, and obedient. At the center of the play is the crossdressed Epicoene, but prominent are the Collegians, a coterie of “masculine” women who live away from their husbands, gad about London, and spend money on the consumer goods (such as coaches) and commerical pastimes (such as theatre) increasingly available in the city. Money, mobility, and the presence of other women in similar circumstances allow the Collegians to form a society in which female tastes prevail and the authority of men, specifically husbands, is flouted. Masculine authority is further undermined by Mistress Otter, a woman who brought a sizable fortune to her marriage with the sea captain Tom Otter, and who through a favorable marriage contract has retained control of much of that money and consequently of her spouse. As she reminds him, he agreed that she “would be princess and reign in mine own house, and you would be my subject and obey me” (III.i.29–30).³⁶ The unnaturalness of her relation to the henpecked Tom Otter is a major part of the play’s misogynist humor. Though not literally crossdressed, all of these women symbolically presume to masculine rule and, predictably, display the devouring appetites (for food, drink, things, sex) associated with women who have taken the bit in their teeth and run from their masters.

The play’s misogyny finds its most complex expression in the figure of Morose, who, hating everything about the bustling world of London (upon which, ironically, he depends for his wealth), especially hates the thought of marrying

³⁶ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. L. A. Beaurline (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 52. All further references to *Epicoene* will be to this edition of the text.

a bossy, noisy London wife. Morose, however, needs a wife to produce an heir and thus prevent the passage of his wealth to his nephew, Dauphine. He wants to exploit woman's power of reproduction without having to deal with her demands, desires, and noise. Cleverly, Dauphine uses male crossdressing—presenting a man dressed as a woman to be Morose's wife—to fulfill Morose's fantasy of finding a silent and compliant wife. The disguised man pretends almost to lack voice, and is presented as one who will spend Morose's wealth not to fulfill her own desires, as the Collegians do, but to display *his* tastes and *his* position. Even her tailors (as is true of the tailor in Petruchio's country house in *The Taming of the Shrew*) will take their directions from Morose, the control of female dress being singled out again as crucial terrain on which masculine authority will be affirmed (II.v.66–82).

We should notice that Dauphine uses the crossdressed figure of Epicoene to present a masculine construction of female perfection, and then, after the marriage, uses the same figure to embody a demonized version of female misrule, as Epicoene joins the Collegians and outdoes them in filling Morose's house with noise, food, and luxuries. In resolving his power struggle with his uncle, then, Dauphine does not cure his uncle of misanthropy and misogyny but exploits these traits and exacerbates them. He outwits his uncle not with the help of women but at their expense, as the man playing Epicoene usurps woman's person and place to act out degrading masculine constructions of her. In the end, the problem of the complexities of right rule in marriage—in the urban setting of London—is sidestepped. The “wife” turns into a man; neither Dauphine nor Morose marries; and property conveniently passes to the next generation without the disruptive agency of woman having anywhere to be openly acknowledged. In this instance, male crossdressing becomes a way to appropriate and then erase the troubling figure of wife.

Dramas in which women dress as men, however, are my chief concern, and the question is: do they present constructions of woman that challenge her subordinate place in the Renaissance sex-gender system and so, perhaps, lead to the transformation of that system? Or do they recuperate, countervail, the threat the figure posed in the streets of London and in the symbolic economy of the period? Often, plays of female crossdressing do the latter. They contain, they vitiate, challenges posed to masculine authority and the traditional gender hierarchy by wealthy women, by unmarried women, by women with voices, desires, and, though not a room, a coach of their own. But that is not all—or the only thing—they do. Some also, through their fables, enabled changes in the way gender identities and gender relations were discursively constructed in the period, and they allowed for challenges to the most repressive aspects of patriarchal ideology.

As a way of placing dramas of female crossdressing within larger gender struggles, I am going to look briefly at three Shakespearean comedies, beginning with what I consider to be the most recuperative: *Twelfth Night*. Undoubtedly, the crossdressed Viola, the woman who can sing both high and low and who is loved by a woman *and* by a man, is a figure who can be read as putting in question the notion of fixed sexual difference. For Catherine Belsey that blurring of sexual difference opens the liberating possibility of undoing all the structures of domination and exploitation premised on binary sexual oppositions.³⁷ The play therefore seems susceptible to a radical reading. For Ste-

³⁷ Catherine Belsey, “Disrupting Sexual Difference.”

phen Greenblatt, by contrast, Viola's sexual indeterminacy simply signifies the play's projection onto the crossdressed woman of the process of *male* individuation, a stage in "the male trajectory of identity."³⁸ For Greenblatt the play thus echoes those Renaissance medical discourses of gender that largely erased the question of female subjectivity and rooted masculine privilege in the natural 'fact' "that within differentiated individuals is a single structure, identifiably male" (Greenblatt, p. 93).

I wish to question both readings, first by probing just how thoroughly Viola's gender identity is ever made indeterminate and thereby made threatening to the *theatre audience* (the subjects being addressed by the play's fictions), second by calling attention to the degree to which the political threat of female insurgency enters the text not through Viola, the crossdressed woman, but through Olivia, a figure whose sexual and economic independence is ironically reined in *by means of* the crossdressed Viola. The play seems to me to embody a fairly oppressive fable of the containment of gender and class insurgency and the valorization of the "good woman" as the one who has interiorized—whatever her clothing—her essential difference from, and subordinate relations to, the male.³⁹ Put another way, the play seems to me to applaud a crossdressed woman who does not aspire to the positions of power assigned men, and to discipline a non-crossdressed woman who does.

Discussion of androgyny, or of the erasure of sexual determinacy, always centers with regard to this play on the figure of Viola. Yet the first thing to say about her crossdressing is that it is in no way adopted to protest gender inequities or to prove that "*Custom* is an idiot." Viola adopts male dress as a practical means of survival in an alien environment and, perhaps, as a magical means of keeping alive a brother believed drowned, and of delaying her own entry into the heterosexual arena until that brother returns. In short, for her, crossdressing is not so much a political act as a psychological haven, a holding place. Moreover, and this is a key point, from the time Viola meets Orsino in I.iv there is no doubt in the audience's mind of her heterosexual sexual orientation or her properly "feminine" subjectivity. As she says when she undertakes to be Orsino's messenger to Olivia, "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (I.iv.42).⁴⁰ She never wavers in that resolve even while carrying out the task of wooing Olivia in Orsino's name. The audience always knows that underneath the page's clothes is a "real" woman, one who expresses dislike of her own disguise ("Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness" [II.ii.27]), and one who freely admits that she has neither the desire nor the aptitude to play the man's part in phallic swordplay. The whole thrust of the dramatic narrative is to release this woman from the prison of her masculine attire and return her to her proper and natural position as wife. Part of the larger ideological consequence of her portrayal, moreover, is to shift the markers of sexual difference

³⁸ "Fiction and Friction," pp. 92–93.

³⁹ For a much less political reading of the play see my own essay, "The Orchestration of *Twelfth Night*" in *Shakespeare's Art of Orchestration* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984). In that essay, while accurately mapping the actual and metaphorical disguises in the play, I did not explore the political implications of the text's insistence on the return to an "undisguised" state—what that meant for aspiring servants, independent women, etc. In short, I accepted the play's dominant ideologies as a mimesis of the true and natural order of things.

⁴⁰ *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 416. All further references to *Twelfth Night* and other Shakespearean texts are taken from this edition of the plays.

inward, from the surface of the body and the apparel which clothes that body, to the interior being of the gendered subject. The play shows that while cross-dressing can cause semiotic and sexual confusion, and therefore is to be shunned, it is not truly a problem for the social order if "the heart" is untouched, or, put another way, if not accompanied by the political desire for a redefinition of female rights and powers and a dismantling of a hierarchical gender system. Despite her masculine attire and the confusion it causes in Illyria, Viola's is a properly feminine subjectivity; and this fact countervails the threat posed by her clothes and removes any possibility that she might permanently aspire to masculine privilege and prerogatives. It is fair to say, I think, that Viola's portrayal, along with that of certain other of Shakespeare's crossdressed heroines, marks one of the points of emergence of the feminine subject of the bourgeois era: a woman whose limited freedom is premised on the interiorization of gender difference and the "willing" acceptance of differential access to power and to cultural and economic assets.

Just as clearly, however, the play records the traditional comic disciplining of a woman who lacks such a properly gendered subjectivity. I am referring, of course, to Olivia, whom I regard as the real threat to the hierarchical gender system in this text, Viola being but an *apparent* threat. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, Olivia is a woman of property, headstrong and initially intractable, and she lacks any discernible male relatives, except the disreputable Toby, to control her or her fortune (p. 69). At the beginning of the play she has decided to do without the world of men, and especially to do without Orsino. These are classic marks of unruliness. And in this play she is punished, comically but unmistakably, by being made to fall in love with the crossdressed Viola. The good woman, Viola, thus becomes the vehicle for humiliating the unruly woman in the eyes of the audience, much as Titania is humiliated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by her union with an ass. Not only is the figure of the male-attired woman thus used to enforce a gender system that is challenged in other contexts by that figure, but also, by a bit of theatrical handy-dandy, the oft-repeated fear that boy actors dressed as women leads to sodomy is displaced here upon a woman dressed as a man. It is Viola who provokes the love of Olivia, the same-sex love between women thus functioning as the marker of the "unnatural" in the play and a chief focus of its comedy.

The treatment of Orsino, by contrast, is much less satirical. He, too, initially poses a threat to the Renaissance sex-gender system by languidly abnegating his active role as masculine wooer and drowning in narcissistic self-love. Yet Orsino, while being roundly mocked *within* the play, especially by Feste, is ridiculed only lightly by the play itself, by the punishments meted out to him. His narcissism and potential effeminacy are displaced, respectively, onto Malvolio and Andrew Aguecheek, who suffer fairly severe humiliations for their follies. In contrast, Orsino, the highest-ranking male figure in the play, simply emerges from his claustrophobic house in Act V and assumes his "rightful" position as governor of Illyria and future husband of Viola. Moreover, Orsino, in contrast to Olivia, shows no overt sexual interest in the crossdressed Viola until her biological identity is revealed, though his language often betrays an unacknowledged desire for the Diana within the male disguise. The point, however, is that the text makes his attraction to Cesario neither overt nor the object of ridicule.

If, as I have been arguing, this text treats gender relations conservatively, the same is true of its treatment of class. If unruly women and unmanly men

are sources of anxiety needing correction, so are upstart crows. The class-jumper Malvolio, who dresses himself up in yellow stockings and cross garters, is savagely punished and humiliated, echoing the more comically managed humiliation of Olivia, the woman who at the beginning of the play jumped gender boundaries to assume control of her house and person and refused her "natural" role in the patriarchal marriage market. The play disciplines independent women like Olivia and upstart crows such as Malvolio and rewards the self-abnegation of a Viola. In the process, female crossdressing is stripped of nearly all of its subversive resonances present in the culture at large. There is no doubt that the play flirts with "dangerous matter": wearing clothes of the opposite sex invites every kind of sexual confusion and "mistaking." But the greatest threat to the sex-gender system is not, I would argue, the potential collapse of biological difference through the figure of Viola but the failure of other characters—namely, Orsino and Olivia—to assume culturally sanctioned positions of dominance and subordination assigned the two genders. As I noted earlier, it is ironic that it is through the crossdressed Viola, with her properly "feminine" subjectivity, that these real threats are removed and both difference and gender hierarchy reinscribed.

Not all the comedies are so recuperative. Portia's crossdressing, for example, is more disruptive than Viola's precisely because Portia's is not so stereotypically a feminine subjectivity. We first see her chafing at the power of a dead father's control over her, and when she adopts male dress, she proves herself more than competent to enter the masculine arena of the courtroom and to hold her own as an advocate in that arena. Her man's disguise is not a psychological refuge but a vehicle for assuming power. Unlike those cross-dressed heroines who faint at the sight of blood or who cannot wield a sword, Portia seems able to play the man's part with conviction. Her actions hardly dismantle the sex-gender system; but they do reveal that masculine prerogatives are based on custom, not nature, since a woman can indeed successfully assume masculine positions of authority.⁴¹ Portia's actions are not aimed at letting her occupy a man's place indefinitely, however, but at making her own place in a patriarchy more bearable. She uses her disguise as Balthazar not only to rescue Antonio from death but also to intervene in the male/male friendship of her husband and Antonio and to gain control over her sexuality while setting the terms for its use in marriage. By the ring trick she gains the right to sleep not with her husband but by and with herself. In a play that insists on the patriarchal authority of fathers to dispose of daughters and that of husbands to govern wives, Portia's ability—through her impersonation of a man—to remain a married virgin and to set the terms for the loss of her virginity is a remarkable feat, as is her ability to guide Bassanio's choice of the correct casket without violating the letter of her father's will.

The incipient subversiveness of this representation—a subversiveness registered still in those modern critical readings of her that stress her manipulative, castrating qualities⁴²—is not unrelated to the fact that this is the most mercantile of Shakespeare's comedies in its preoccupations. At one level its ideological

⁴¹ Here I am agreeing with Karen Newman's view in "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ*, 38 (1987), 19–33, that Portia is an unruly woman who challenges masculine rhetorical hegemony and intervenes in the traffic in women upon which Renaissance patriarchal authority depended.

⁴² Harry Berger, Jr., "Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Casket Scene Revisited," *SQ*, 32 (1981), 155–62.

project is the reconciliation of landed and commercial wealth, a mediation between feudal and protocapitalist economic systems.⁴³ But the mediation of class conflict through the trope of marriage in this instance cuts against the patriarchal gender system. By feminizing the gracious world of landed wealth and masculinizing the commercial world of Venice, and by making the latter ill and unable to cure itself, Shakespeare created a fictional structure in which the ideology of male dominance breaks down. The woman is the only source of secure wealth, the only person in the courtroom capable of successfully playing the man's part and ousting the alien intruder. Portia may be "merely" an exception to her culture's patriarchal assumptions, but she, like Elizabeth I, is an exception that has continued to provoke uneasiness.

More complex still is *As You Like It*, which explicitly invites, through its epilogue, a consideration of how secure even the most recuperative representations of crossdressing could be in a theatre in which male actors regularly played women's roles. Rosalind's crossdressing, of course, occurs in the holiday context of the pastoral forest, and, as Natalie Davis has argued, holiday inversions of order can spur social change or, in other instances, can merely reconfirm the existing order.⁴⁴ The representation of Rosalind's holiday humor has the primary effect, I think, of confirming the gender system and perfecting rather than dismantling it by making a space for mutuality within relations of dominance.⁴⁵ Temporarily lording it over Orlando, teaching him how to woo and appointing the times of his coming and going, she *could* be a threatening figure if she did not constantly, contrapuntally, reveal herself to the audience as the not-man, as in actuality a lovesick maid whose love "hath an unknown bottom, like the bay of Portugal" (IV.i.208) and who faints at the sight of blood. Crucially, like Viola, Rosalind retains a properly feminine subjectivity: "dost thou think, though I am caparison'd like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?" (III.ii.194-96). As Annette Kuhn has argued, in certain circumstances crossdressing intensifies, rather than blurs, sexual difference, sometimes by calling attention to the woman's failure to perform the masculine role signified by her dress.⁴⁶ Rosalind's fainting constitutes such a reminder, endearing her to earlier generations of readers and audiences for her true "womanliness." And, as in *Twelfth Night*, the thrust of the narrative is toward that long-delayed moment of disclosure, orchestrated so elaborately in Act V, when the heroine will doff her masculine attire along with the saucy games of youth and accept the position of wife, when her biological identity, her gender identity, and the semiotics of dress will coincide.

Where this account of the consequences of Rosalind's crossdressing becomes too simple, however, is in a close consideration of the particular *way* in which Rosalind plays with her disguise. Somewhat like Portia, Rosalind uses her disguise to redefine (albeit in a limited way) the position of woman in a patriarchal

⁴³ For a complex argument concerning the play's relationship to changing economic practices in the Renaissance, see Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 195-211.

⁴⁴ Davis, "Women on Top," esp. pp. 153-54.

⁴⁵ For the view that the romantic comedies champion mutuality between the sexes, see Marianne Novy's *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), esp. Chapter 2, "'An You Smile Not, He's Gagged': Mutuality in Shakespearean Comedy," pp. 21-44.

⁴⁶ "Sexual Disguise and Cinema," *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 48-73, esp. pp. 55-57.

society. The most unusual aspect of her behavior is that while dressed as a man, Rosalind impersonates a woman, and that woman is herself—or, rather, a self that is the logical conclusion of Orlando's romantic, Petrarchan construction of her. Saucy, imperious, and fickle by turns, Rosalind plays out masculine constructions of femininity, in the process showing Orlando their limitations. Marianne Doane has argued that "masquerade," the self-conscious staging, parody, exaggeration of cultural constructions of self, offers women a choice between simple identification with male selves—which is how she reads the meaning of crossdressing—or simple inscription within patriarchal constructions of the feminine.⁴⁷ In my view, the figure of Rosalind dressed as a boy engages in playful masquerade as, in playing Rosalind for Orlando, she acts out the parts scripted for women by her culture. Doing so does not release Rosalind from patriarchy but reveals the constructed nature of patriarchy's representations of the feminine and shows a woman manipulating those representations in her own interest, theatricalizing for her own purposes what is assumed to be innate, teaching her future mate how to get beyond certain ideologies of gender to more enabling ones.

Moreover, this play, more than other Shakespearean comedies, deliberately calls attention to the destabilizing fact that it is boy actors playing the roles of all the women in the play, including Rosalind. There is a permanent gap on the stage between the incipiently masculine identity of the boy actors and their appropriation of the "grace, / Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman"—to borrow a definition of the actor's task from the job assigned the Page in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* (Ind., ll. 131–32). I agree with Kathleen McLuskie that at some level boy actors playing women must simply have been accepted in performance as a convention.⁴⁸ Otherwise, audience involvement with dramatic narratives premised on heterosexual love and masculine/feminine difference would have been minimal. It is also true, as McLuskie and others suggest, that the convention of the boy actor playing a girl can, at any moment, be unmasked *as* a convention and the reality (that the fictional woman is played by a boy) can be revealed. One of those moments occurs at the end of *As You Like It*. The play has achieved closure in part by reinscribing everyone into his or her "proper" social position. The duke is now again a duke and not a forest outlaw, Rosalind is now Rosalind and not Ganymede, and so forth. But when in the Epilogue the character playing Rosalind reminds us that she is played by a boy, the neat convergence of biological sex and culturally constructed gender is once more severed. If a boy can so successfully personate the voice, gait, and manner of a woman, how stable are those boundaries separating one sexual kind from another, and thus how secure are those powers and privileges assigned to the hierarchically superior sex, which depends upon notions of difference to justify its dominance?⁴⁹ The Epilogue playfully invites this question. That it does so suggests something about the contradictory nature of the theatre as a site of ideological production, an institution that can circulate recuperative fables of crossdressing, reinscribing sexual difference and gender hierarchy, and at the same time can make visible on the level of theatrical practice the contamination of sexual kinds.

⁴⁷ "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen*, 23 (1982), 74–89.

⁴⁸ "The Act, the Role, and the Actor: Boy Actresses on the Elizabethan Stage," esp. p. 121.

⁴⁹ For good discussions of the disruptive effects of the Epilogue, see Catherine Belsey's "Disrupting Sexual Difference" and Phyllis Rackin's "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage" (cited in note 3, above).

I would argue that a play like *Epicoene* comes much closer than a play like *As You Like It* to making clear what is at stake in maintaining a hierarchical two-gender system. Money is at stake—who will control the spending of wealth and the passage of property. Control of other assets is at stake—such as woman's reproductive capabilities and her time and labor. Morose wants a legitimate heir and a wife who will not gad and gossip and spend money but will manage his house and display his wealth as he dictates. Only *The Merchant of Venice*, of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, because of its emphasis on the control of wealth and of woman's sexuality, comes as close as *Epicoene* to revealing the material consequences of patriarchy's gender ideology. At best these other comedies reveal the constructed nature of gender definitions and distinctions even as they return women, at play's end, to their admittedly somewhat ameliorated places within the dominant patriarchal order. Such revelations of the human, rather than the divine, origins of the gender system are not negligible. They are part of that process of demystification that Thomas Sorge and others have seen as one of the chief social functions of the Renaissance stage, one of the ways it participated in the historical process eventuating in the English Revolution.⁵⁰

In a few cases, however, plays of female crossdressing were more than sites where creative accommodations to a demystified patriarchy were enacted. Instead they protested the hierarchical sex-gender system and the material injustices that, in conjunction with other social practices, it spawned. The obvious case in point is Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, a work based on an actual London woman's life and a work traversed by discourses of social protest not found in most of the plays I have so far examined. First, as Mary Beth Rose has argued, this play is unusual in presenting us with a woman who does not use male dress as a disguise.⁵¹ She does not don male apparel to escape from danger or to pursue a husband. In this she differs from Mary, the hero's love interest in the drama, who in the first act puts on the clothes of a seamstress to approach her lover secretly and later dresses as a boy. Her disguises give Mary a certain freedom, but their sole purpose is to enable her, ultimately, to become a wife, though even she defies patriarchal authority by taking a husband of her own choosing. By contrast, Moll adopts male dress deliberately and publicly; and she uses it to signal her freedom from the traditional positions assigned a woman in her culture. As she says to the young hero:

. . . I have no humour to marry, I love to lie o' both sides o'th'bed myself, and again o'th'other side; a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it. I love you so well, sir, for your good will I'd be loath you should repent your bargain after, and therefore we'll ne'er come together at first. I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place.⁵²

(II.ii.36–44)

⁵⁰ "The Failure of Orthodoxy in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 225–41.

⁵¹ "Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*," *ELR*, 14 (1984), 367–91.

⁵² *The Roaring Girl*, ed. Andor Gomme (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976), p. 47. All other quotations from the play will refer to this edition.

The issue is control. Refusing a male head, Moll asserts a freedom extraordinary for a woman. Dressed as a woman she enters the merchants' shops; dressed as a man she fights with Laxton at Grey's Inn fields; and at the end of the play she moves easily among the rogues and "canters" of the London underworld.

Of course, a woman who thus contravenes the accepted conventions governing female dress—who smokes a pipe, carries a sword, bobs her hair, and dons French slops (see the frontispiece of the play for an illustration of such a subversive and disorderly woman)—invites being read as a whore, as a woman at the mercy of an ungovernable sexual appetite. Importantly, the play insists on Moll Firth's chastity. This insistence can be read as a way of containing the subversiveness of her representation, of showing her accepting the central fact of the good woman's lot—i.e., that she not use her sexuality except in lawful marriage. Another way to read the insistence on chastity is to see it as an interruption of that discourse about women which equates a mannish independence with sexual promiscuity. In the play Moll is constantly read by the men around her as a potential bedmate, a sexual prize. Even Trapdoor, the servant hired to spy on Moll, assumes he can master her sexually, that, when "her breeches are off, she shall follow me" (I.ii.223). Laxton, the gentleman rake, makes the same mistake, finding her mannish clothes sexually provocative, the gap between the semiotic signals of her dress and her well-known biological identity making her hidden body the more alluring. Tellingly, Moll both refuses Laxton's sexual advances and offers him a reading of some women's sexual promiscuity that is refreshingly economic in orientation. If the master narrative of the *Hic Mulier* tracts is that women's sexual looseness stems from their unnatural aspiration beyond their assigned place, that is, beyond the control of the male, Moll argues that women are unchaste because they are poor. She may give us the best gloss on those women, dressed as men, who were hauled before the Aldermen's Court and accused of "lewd" behavior. To Laxton, Moll says:

In thee I defy all men, their worst hates,
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools.
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives,
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten,
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fastened on a golden hook:
Those are the lecher's food, his prey, he watches
For quarrelling wedlocks, and poor shifting sisters,
'Tis the best fish he takes: but why, good fisherman,
Am I thought meat for you, that never yet
Had angling rod cast towards me? 'cause, you'll say,
I'm given to sport, I'm often merry, jest:
Had mirth no kindred in the world but lust?

(III.i.90–103)

Rather than agreeing that it is women's nature that is to be endlessly debated and her person disciplined, Moll turns attention to the social realities that create conditions for the sale of sex and to the assumptions made by men about women.

More than the other crossdressed women we have so far examined, Moll is also associated with various sorts of protest against social injustice. At the beginning of Act V she is explicitly associated with Long Meg of Westminster, another colorful character described in Renaissance ballads and in a lost play,

who embodied lower-class resistance to established authority and for much of her life protested against the injustices of patriarchal marriages.⁵³ For the last two acts of *The Roaring Girl*, Moll, like Meg of Westminster and a bit like a Lady Skimington, protests against and remedies various social injustices. It is she who, for example, rescues Jack Dapper from the law when his father would have him unjustly incarcerated, proclaiming "If any gentleman be in scrivener's bands / Send but for Moll, she'll bail him by these hands" (III.iii.216–17). She is also instrumental in interrupting the tyrannous plans of Sebastian's father to keep his son, for economic reasons, from marrying Mary Fitz-Allard. And she is the one who unmasks the knavery of the two lowlife characters, Tearcat and Trapdoor, who are impersonating wounded soldiers and in that guise fleeing people for alms money. Further, she makes a thief promise to return a purse he had filched from one of her friends. In short, Moll is heavily involved in righting wrongs, though it is not always perfectly clear that she embodies a consistent social philosophy or class-gender position. For example, seeing marriage as a straightjacket for herself, she nonetheless promotes it for Mary Fitz-Allard and other women. No thief, she nonetheless knows all the lowlife types of London and knows their canting jargon, their thieving tricks.

Middleton and Dekker have attempted to decriminalize Moll, to present her as neither thief nor whore, to make her an exception to society's rules concerning women's behavior but not a fundamental threat to the sex-gender system. But her portrayal is not entirely innocuous and sanitized. It partakes of discursive traditions of social protest, including protest against Renaissance patriarchal marriage and women's position within such marriages, that contradict the tendency simply to construct her as an eccentric "exception." In the final moments of the play, asked when she will marry, Moll replies:

. . . I'll tell you when i'faith:
When you shall hear
Gallants void from sergeants' fear,
Honesty and truth unslandered,
Woman manned but never pandered,
Cheators booted but not coached,
Vessels older ere they're broached.
If my mind be then not varied,
Next day following I'll be married.
(V.ii.216–24)

Enigmatic, like the fool's prophecy in *Lear*, Moll's prophecy is clear in its utopian aspirations, clear in making the ending of women's oppression a central part of a more encompassing utopian vision of social reform. Unlike the other plays I have discussed, *The Roaring Girl* uses the image of the crossdressed woman to defy expectations about woman's nature and to protest the injustices caused by the sex-gender system.⁵⁴ And if comedy demands a marriage, it gets

⁵³ For a good discussion of both Moll Firth and Long Meg of Westminster, see Simon Shepherd's *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981), esp. Chapter 6, "Roaring Girls," pp. 67–92.

⁵⁴ After finishing my own essay, I was delighted to come upon Jonathan Dollimore's "Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection," *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. XVII (1987), 53–81, in which he argues that female crossdressing can, in some circumstances, be a mode of transgression and not an exemplification of false consciousness. I found particularly useful his critique of the essentialist theories of subjectivity underlying the assumption, in many discussions of female crossdressing, that it is a social practice that distorts or erases authentic female identity.

the marriage of Mary Fitz-Allard and Sebastian, but not the marriage of Moll.

What then can we say, in conclusion, about female crossdressing on the Renaissance stage? I think that, often, female crossdressing on the stage is not a strong site of resistance to the period's patriarchal sex-gender system. Ironically, rather than blurring gender difference or challenging male domination and exploitation of women, female crossdressing often strengthens notions of difference by stressing what the disguised woman *cannot* do, or by stressing those feelings held to constitute a "true" female subjectivity. While some plots *do* reveal women successfully wielding male power and male authority, they nearly invariably end with the female's willing doffing of male clothes and, presumably, male prerogatives. It is hard to avoid concluding that many crossdressing comedies have as their social function the recuperation of threats to the sex-gender system, sometimes by ameliorating the worst aspects of that system and opening a greater space for woman's speech and action. Yet this recuperation is never perfectly achieved. In a few plays, such as *The Roaring Girl*, the resistance to patriarchy and its marriage customs is clear and sweeping; in others, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, the heroine achieves a significant rewriting of her position within patriarchy even as she takes up the role of wife. Others, simply by having women successfully play male roles, however temporarily, or by making women's roles the objects of self-conscious masquerade, put in question the naturalness, the inevitability, of dominant constructions of men's and women's natures and positions in the gender hierarchy.

Moreover, I think it is a mistake to restrict our considerations of the ideological import of Renaissance theatre to an analysis of the scripts, even an analysis of the scripts in relation to extradramatic practices and texts. Ideology is enacted through all the theatre's practices, from its pricing structures for admission to the times of its performances. As we have seen, the fact of an all-male acting company complicates the ideological import of these crossdressing plays in ways that simply don't obtain when, as is generally true today, women play women's parts on the stage. Moreover, whatever the conservative import of certain crossdressing fables, the very fact that women went to the theatre to see them attests to the contradictions surrounding this social institution. Women at the public theatre were doing many of the very things that the polemicists who attacked crossdressing railed against. They were gadding about outside the walls of their own houses, spending money on a new consumer pleasure, allowing themselves to become a spectacle to the male gaze.

Andrew Gurr has concluded in his exhaustive new study of Shakespeare's audience that women were indeed at the public theatres, and that many of them were probably citizen's wives—wives of the shopkeepers and merchants increasingly playing a leading part in the life of urban London.⁵⁵ These were the very women whose enhanced freedoms made them threats to the patriarchal order, and who were heavily recruited to the banner of chastity, silence, obedience, and domesticity. This is, in fact, the group—the gentlewomen citizens of London—to whom, as early as 1579, Stephen Gosson spoke in his warnings against the pollutions of the playhouse, enjoining them to "Keep home, and shun all occasions of ill speech."⁵⁶ His argument was that women who went to the theatre made themselves spectacles and therefore vulnerable to the suspicion of being whores. "Thought is free; you can forbidd no man, that vieweth

⁵⁵ *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), esp. pp. 61–64.

⁵⁶ Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse* (1579; rpt. New York: Garland, 1973), F^v–F^{4v}, esp. F⁴.

you, to noute you and that noateth you, to judge you, for entring to places of suspition" (F2). It might be all right for court ladies to put themselves on public display, to occupy a box at the private theatres, for example, but not middle-class wives. Massinger ends *The City Madam* by warning city dames "to move / In their spheres, and willingly to confess / In their habits, manners, and their highest port, / A distance 'twixt the city and the court" (V.iii.153–56).⁵⁷ One of the most transgressive acts the real Moll Firth performed was to sit, in her masculine attire, on the stage of the Fortune and to sing a song upon the lute. She did what only court ladies and gallants were allowed to do: she made a spectacle of herself.

Of course, the average woman playgoer did not claim the clothes of the male gallant or his place upon the stage; nonetheless, to be at the theatre, especially without a male companion, was to transgress the physical and symbolic boundaries of the middle-class woman's domestic containment. Perhaps unwittingly, these women were altering gender relations. The public theatre was not a ritual space, but a commercial venture. Citizens' wives who went to this theatre might, at one extreme, be invited by its fictions to take up positions of chastity, silence, and obedience, but at another extreme by its commercial practices they were positioned as consumers, critics, spectators, and spectacles. The theatre as a social institution signified change. It blurred the boundaries between degrees and genders by having men of low estate wear the clothes of noblemen and of women, and by having one's money, not one's blood or title, decide how high and how well one sat, or whether, indeed, one stood. To go to the theatre was, in short, to be positioned at the crossroads of cultural change and contradiction—and this seems to me especially true for the middle-class female playgoer, who by her practices was calling into question the "place" of woman, perhaps more radically than did Shakespeare's fictions of crossdressing.

⁵⁷ Phillip Massinger, *The City Madam*, ed. Cyrus Hoy (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 100.

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