Chapter 1

Traditional History:
A Feminist Deconstruction

Classic drag: the male creation of female parts

General principles

From a feminist perspective, initial observations about the history of theatre noted the absence of women within the tradition. Since traditional scholarship has focused on evidence related to written texts, the absence of women playwrights became central to early feminist investigations. The fact that there was no significant number of extant texts written by women for the stage until the seventeenth century produced a rather astounding sense of absence in the classical traditions of the theatre. The silence of women's voices in these traditions led feminist historians who were interested in women playwrights to concentrate on periods in which they did emerge: primarily the seventeenth century in England, the nineteenth century in America and the twentieth century in Europe and America. These studies produced, beginning in the early 1970s, a number of new anthologies of plays by women and biographies of women playwrights.

Work on the classical periods became possible by studying the image of women within plays written by men. Many scholars attribute the beginning of this type of textual discovery to Millett's influential book *Sexual Politics* (1970), which illustrated a way to recognise and interpret the images of women in male literature as misogynistic. *Sexual Politics* offered a way to read against texts by

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becoming aware of their gendered bias and, as the title suggests, to foreground the notion that art is not distinct from politics. While Millett's book concentrated on describing the images of women, other early works such as Judith Fetterly's *The Resisting Reader* showed how to resist reading texts by men as they were conventionally read. Fetterly outlined ways of reading against texts to discover the feminist subtext latent in such subversions. Works on images of women still predominate in the feminist criticism of classical texts. Numerous revisions of Aeschylus and Shakespeare are currently being published. There are two basic types of image: positive roles, which depict women as independent, intelligent and even heroic; and a surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the Bitch, the Witch, the Vamp and the Virgin/Goddess. These roles reflect the perspective of the playwright or the theatrical tradition on women. Originally, feminist historians used these theatrical images of women as evidence of the kind of lives actual women might have lived in the period – for example, the information the characters and situations of Medea or Phaedra might give us about the lives of powerful women in Greece. This approach was useful because traditional socio-economic histories tend to exhibit the same absence of women as does the literature. In the 1970s, ground-breaking work on women in history was done in both realms: the socio-historical evidence afforded by theatrical texts was identified, and documents on laws, social practices and economic restrictions on women in history were collated and published. This work enabled feminist critics and historians to produce a new kind of cultural analysis, based on the interplay of cultural and socio-economic evidence, to discover the nature of women's lives in the classical periods.

The availability of these materials led to a new understanding of the complicity of art with political projects, as well as the complicity of traditional history with the patriarchy, reversing the original interpretations of these documents. Feminist critics began to perceive that in studying the representation of women in classical plays and histories it was of fundamental importance to distinguish between private and public life. Public life is privileged in these sources, while private life remains relatively invisible. The new feminist analyses prove that this division is gender-specific: i.e. public life is the property of men, and women are

relegated to the invisible private sphere. As a result of the suppression of real women, the culture invented its own representation of the gender, and it was this fictional 'Woman' who appeared on stage, in the myths and in the plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women. (See Teresa de Lauretis for a development of this concept.) The new feminist approach to these cultural fictions distinguishes this 'Woman' as a male-produced fiction from historical women, insisting that there is little connection between the two categories. Within theatre practice, the clearest illustration of this division is in the tradition of the all-male stage. 'Woman' was played by male actors in drag, while real women were banned from the stage. This practice reveals the fictionality of the patriarchy's representation of the gender. Classical plays and theatrical conventions can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production.

Application

The beginning of the Western tradition of theatre is traditionally dated from the Athenian festivals of Dionysos in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Our notions of drama, acting, physical theatre space, costume, mask and the relation between actors and audience can be said to stem from these festivals, their rites and ceremonies. In the sixth century, both women and men participated in them, but during the fifth century, when the ceremonies were becoming what is known as theatre, women disappeared from the practice. No record has been found of any law forbidding women to participate in the songs and dances, nor is there any evidence for the precise date of the change. Margarete Bieber, a recognised authority on the Greek and Roman theatre, merely notes that it was 'Attic morality' that 'banished women from public life'.[1] This implies that the reason for the exclusion of women must be sought in the emerging cultural codes of Athens, rather than in specific political or theatrical developments. Three areas of change – in socio-economic organisation, in the creative arts and in the predominant myths – help us to understand the

change in theatrical practice. The intersection of all of these elements may be recognised in the text of *The Oresteia*.

Among the new economic practices, the rise of the family unit radically altered the role of women in Greek public life. Ironically, the important role women began to assume within the family unit was the cause of their removal from public life. The family unit became the site for the creation and transmission of personal wealth. With the rise of the *polis* (the city state), the extended network of relationships characteristic of aristocracies gave way to single families as the basis of social organisation. The increased use of metals as commodities and the small-scale cultivation of land made it possible for individuals to control their own wealth. Yet, while ownership became more individual and confined to the family unit, it was largely limited to the male gender. The rights of women to own and exchange property were severely restricted. For example, women could only inherit in the absence of a male and were not allowed to barter for property over one *medimnos* (bushel). Within this new economy, women became a medium of exchange and marriage became an institution of ownership.[2] In fact, the Greek word for marriage, *ekdosis*, meant 'loan' – women were loaned to their husbands by their fathers, and in the case of divorce, were returned to their fathers.

With this change in economic organisation came a concomitant change in political organisation. The *oikos*, or household, became the basis of citizenship.[3] Citizenship was dependent upon family lines – a son was granted citizenship only if his parents were citizens, but without a son the parents could not retain their citizenship. This rule led to the strict definition and regulation of the sex life of the woman. The mother–wife acquired new moral and legal responsibilities in relation to the legitimacy and security of heirs and, by extension, political membership of the *polis*. Clear lines of descent were vital to the *polis*, making adultery a crime against society rather than a matter only of personal transgression. Yet, at the same time as the household became controlled by the needs of the state, its activities became totally separate from those which were considered the business of the state or as belonging to public life. As Nancy Hartsock puts it in her book *Money, Sex and Power*, the Greeks defined the household as a private, apolitical space quite distinct from the public, political space of the *polis*: 'The result was a theorization

of politics and political power as activities that occurred in a masculine arena characterized by freedom from necessary labor, dominance of intellect or soul,' while the domestic space was defined by necessary labour and as a place where bodily needs were dominant.[4] Since Athenian women were confined to the house (explicitly, in the laws of Solon), they were removed from the public life of the intellect and the soul, lost their economic and legal powers, and were confined to the world of domestic labour, child-bearing and concomitant sexual duties. Given their exclusion from the public life of the *polis* and their diminished role in its socio-economic organisation, it is not surprising that their participation in the Dionysian festivals became restricted to private observance and that they were duly excluded from the public stage.

Alongside these changes in socio-economic organisation came new cultural institutions – theatre being only one among several. Athens created new architecture, new religions and new myths. These cultural institutions became allied with the suppression of women by creating the new gender role of 'Woman', which served to privilege the masculine gender and oppress the feminine one. At base, the new cultural categories of gender were constructed as categories of difference and polarity.[5] 'Woman' appeared as the opposite of man. This move can best be seen in the new myths and associated architectural depictions of the Amazons, which conflate female gender with the image of the outsider and with characteristics typical of the male. The Amazons, dangerous but defeated, reverse the 'natural' gender roles. They are warriors who force men to do 'women's' work, such as child-rearing, while the women go off to war.[6] The Amazons also embody other myths of gender reversal: for instance, they keep female babies and dispose of male ones, whereas the custom (in Sparta, for instance) was to dispose of female babies.[7] Moreover, the word 'Amazon' (meaning 'no breast') ties such practices to a biological secondary sex characteristic specific to the female. The new architecture of the Acropolis, the civic centre of Athens, displays the downfall of the Amazons and the rise of Athena. Central to the new political order, then, is the fall of these women who would defy correct gender associations and the rise of a woman who would enforce the new image of 'Woman' in the *polis*. This demise of the old

images of women and the rise of Athena are central themes in *The Oresteia*.

The genealogy of the gods provides the mytho-historical context for this creation of the new 'Woman'. The history of the gods explains why genders are opposite, locked in conflict, and why the male gender must defeat the female. The myth of the primeval goddess and earth mother Gaia is a story of the dangers of her womb – the story of her children is one of murders and castrations. In the end Zeus is victorious: he swallows his wife, Metis, in order to gain her power of reproduction and then gives birth to Athena. Athena represents the end of the dangers of the womb, for she has no mother (breaking the matriarchal line and subverting identification with her own sex), has no sexuality (she remains a virgin), defeats the Amazons, allies herself with the reign of Zeus and Apollo, and thereby brings order to Athens. At about the same time as Athena rose to prominence, the cult of Dionysos appeared in Athens and usurped from earlier female goddesses their associations with fertility and sexuality, while boys assimilated female sexuality in the social practice of male homosexuality (later idealised by Plato). This male usurpation of female fertility later became a metaphor for philosophical inquiry in Plato's *Theatetus*, where he asserts that his art of midwifery is for 'men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul', for he deals with 'the offspring of a young man's thought' (lines 150b–c).[8] The genealogy of the gods, in dividing female sexuality from power, presaged the assimilation of female sexuality by Dionysos and the isolation of power in the image of the motherless virgin Athena. In turn, the new mythology also presaged the same usurpation of female fertility in Plato's idealism.

The rise of drama, in the context of the Athenian state festivals dedicated to Dionysos, places theatre securely within this new patriarchal institution of gender wars. Theatre must be gender-specific to the male and enact the suppression of real women and the creation of the new 'Woman'. The maenads (the female celebrants in the Dionysian festivals) must dance into oblivion, while the satyrs (the male celebrants) must become the first choruses of the new drama. 'The singer Arion is said to have given to the singers of the dithyramb . . . the costume of the satyrs. The practice of representing someone other than oneself

grew out of this ecstasy and led to the mimic art of the actors.'[9] In other words, the very invention of acting was gender-specific: the actor was the satyr.

The gender-specific quality of the actor in the satyr play was even underscored by his wearing of a leather phallus. Thus, the actor/dramatic subject was male. Yet, for the battle of the genders, the female too had to be represented: a male actor had to perform the female role. Though literary critics and theatre historians tend to mention this strange phenomenon only in passing, Bieber does note one specific problem for male actors in their representation of women: as depicted on vases, the maenads seem to be in a state of ecstasy – to play them the male actors needed to understand the religious emotion felt by these women.[10] Yet a more central problem emerges: how does a man depict a woman? How does the male actor signal to the audience that he is playing a female character? Besides wearing the female costume (with short tunic) and the female mask (with long hair), he might have indicated gender through gesture, movement and intonation. In considering this portrayal, it is important to remember that the notion of the female derived from the male point of view, which remained alien to female experience and reflected the perspective of the gendered opposite. This vocabulary of gestures initiated the image of 'Woman' as she is seen on the stage – institutionalised through patriarchal culture and represented by male-originated signs of her appropriate gender behaviour. Moreover, the practice of male actors playing women probably encouraged the creation of female roles which lent themselves to generalisation and stereotype. The depiction and development of female characters in the written texts must have been accommodated to the way they were presented on stage. Though all characters were formalised and masked, even with cross-gender casting for female characters these were distinguished in kind from the male characters. A subtextual message was delivered about the nature of the female gender, its behaviour, appearance, and formal distance from the representation of the male.

The Athenian theatre practice created a political and aesthetic arena for ritualised and codified gender behaviour, linking it to civic privileges and restrictions. This gender principle was elevated to 'classic' status and so became a paradigmatic element in the history of theatre, connoting the expulsion of women from the

canon and the ideal. The etymology of 'classic', connoting 'class', indicates that this expulsion is also related to the economic and legal privileges of the 'first class' – a class to which women were denied admittance. The consonance of aesthetic criteria with economic ones becomes clear in the term itself. The 'classics' of Athenian, Roman and Elizabethan drama were all produced by cultures that denied women access to the stage and allowed them few legal and economic rights. The values of a patriarchal society are embedded in the texts of these periods. Female characters reflect the absence of real women from the stage and the reasons for their absence. Each culture that regards it as valuable to revive those classic plays actively participates in the same patriarchal subtext which created those female characters as 'Woman'. Though we cannot examine an early production of a Greek classic, we can examine one of the 'classic' texts produced for the Dionysian festivals and still staged and studied in our own culture. *The Oresteia* exhibits all of the themes and practices discussed above. Moreover, its elevated position in the canon illustrates its lasting value. A feminist reading of *The Oresteia* illustrates the defeat of the old matriarchal genealogy, the nature of 'Woman' as portrayed on the stage, the rise of Athena and the legacy of the suppression of real women.

'The Oresteia'

Many feminist critics and historians have analysed *The Oresteia* as a text central to the formalisation of misogyny. Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett characterise the trilogy as the mythical rendering of a patriarchal takeover. Nancy Hartsock argues that it associates the female gender with sexuality and nature, those forces that must be tamed in outside activities and within the inner person for the survival of the *polis*.[11] Hartsock locates *The Oresteia* within the context of dramatic festivals themselves associated with male-gender activities. The drama, like the four-horse chariot race, is a contest. It formalises *agones* (contests) and the notion of winners and losers. The festivals associate the heroic ideal of valour in battle with the peace-time ideal of rhetorical and dramatic competition.[12] The subject of the drama is the subject of war – the male warrior hero. When this *agon* is inscribed with the conflicts of gender, the dramatic dice are

loaded for the same gender-specific hero to win. *The Oresteia* enacts the 'battle of the sexes', using Athenian cultural and political codes to prescribe that women must lose the battle.

Early in the first play of the triology, *Agamemnon*, the chorus of old men explicates the dramatic situation within the perspective of male–female problems. The old men describe a promiscuous woman (Helen) as the cause of the Trojan War, in which Agamemnon is presently engaged, and tell of the war fleet launched as a result of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his virgin daughter Iphigenia. The Trojan War and the relationship of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are already fraught with conflicts embedded in gender roles. Then the chorus prepares the audience for the entrance of Clytemnestra by linking gender with certain attributes of character. They suggest that steady resolve and intensity of purpose are gender-specific when they refer to the male (inner) strength of Clytemnestra (line 10).[13] Within this context Clytemnestra enters, played by a man. After she (he) speaks, the chorus congratulates her for thinking like a man and dismisses her announcement of the end of the war as just 'like a woman to take rapture before fact' (line 483). These lines presume certain gender roles regarding the judgement of evidence and decision-making. They also play with a certain level of irony founded on theatrical convention, since a man in drag plays a woman who 'thinks like a man'. Clearly, the primary referent is the male. The notion of the female, like the notion of the Amazon, disrupts the male order. Clytemnestra is introduced as a figure of that disruption. The absence of the male king has provided her with 'unnatural' political power. In his absence, she has taken a male lover. By this act, she disrupts the gender code of female sexuality, for the tradition was that women were to remain faithful to their husbands even during ten-year wars. The chorus treats Clytemnestra's liaison as dangerous. Yet, when Agamemnon enters with his sexual war booty, Cassandra, the text does not imply any social disruption. In fact, the dramatic pathos of the drama favours Agamemnon despite his brutal treatment of women, as evidenced by his rape of Cassandra and his murder of Iphigenia.

Cassandra provides the Athenian image of the woman in the public arena (even though she is played by a man). She has certain privileges of belonging (she is a priestess of Apollo, which

assures her of sexual liaisons with citizens of rank such as Agamemnon), but she does not have the privilege of effective public speech because of her prior refusal to be violated by Apollo. Cassandra's entrance, as an outsider, as Agamemnon's booty, mute to Clytemnestra and expelled from effective dialogue, even portrayed by a male actor, projects the strength of the misogyny embedded in the Athenian patriarchal order. What remains in the play is only Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon and her complete vilification. At the end, the chorus mourns Agamemnon as one who had to fight a war for a woman and then be killed by one (lines 1453–4).

In the third play, *The Eumenides*, the winner of the battle of the sexes – in Athens and among the gods – is decided. From a feminist perspective, it is ironic that this play dramatises the so-called beginnings of democracy. Moreover, within theatre history, *The Eumenides* is often marked as the play of the new order of civilisation which created our Western tradition of reason and fair play. This may be an accurate designation in so far as Western civilisation has followed the deciding gender judgements of Athenian culture in condemning women to a subservient role. The play rests upon a new genealogy of the gods. It opens with the old order, the vile goddesses, the Furies (they become 'Eumenides' – the 'benevolent ones' – with their change of role at the end of the play). They create an ugly, frightening characterisation of the earlier chthonic female religions. The masks created for them were famous for their disgusting appearance. An extant remark about them states that they 'horrified women into miscarriages'[14] – an interesting anecdote for its gender and sexual connotations. The Furies have arrived in Athens, while pursuing Orestes to revenge his murder of his mother. They define their role as the punishment of matricide (line 210). Orestes appeals to Apollo for help and Athena appears to solve the problem. She institutes a trial, exhibiting Athenian methods of justice, to try Orestes for his murder. The decision is to set Orestes free. This conclusion is damning evidence for the public rationalisation of misogyny, for it rests upon establishing the parental line as male. The mother is not the parent but the nurse of the child. The parent is defined as 'he who mounts' (lines 658–61). Athena is the supreme proof of this fact because she had no mother and was begotten by the male god Zeus (lines 734–8).

The Furies are confined to a cave and their function is no longer to revenge matricide, but to preside over marriages. Thus, the trilogy which began with the end of the Trojan War and followed the fortunes of the house of Agamemnon ends with the institution of democracy and decisions about gender roles and the rules governing procreation. This ending can be seen as paradigmatic of future plot structures in the Western play-writing tradition. A great many plays in the tradition resolve various kinds of civic, historical and psychological problems with the institution of marriage. The proper gender role for women is inscribed in this conclusion.

The feminist reader of *The Oresteia* discovers that she must read against the text, resisting not only its internal sense of pathos and conclusion, but also the historical and cultural codes which surround it, including its treatment within theatre history. The pathos the feminist reader feels may be for Iphigenia and Clytemnestra rather than for Agamemnon. She may perceive Athena as a male-identified woman in alliance with the male network of power rather than as a hero of Athens. She definitely feels excluded from the conventions of the stage, bewildered by the convention of cross-gender casting, which is only practised for female characters. Mimesis is not possible for her. Perhaps the feminist reader will decide that the female roles have nothing to do with women, that these roles should be played by men, as fantasies of 'Woman' as 'other' than man, as disruptions of a patriarchal society and illustrative of its fear and loathing of the female parts. In fact, the feminist reader might become persuaded that the Athenian roles of Medea, Clytemnestra, Cassandra and Phaedra are properly played as drag roles. The feminist reader might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even attempt to identify with them. Moreover, the feminist historian might conclude that these roles contain no information about the experience of real women in the classical world. Nevertheless, the feminist scholar must recognise that theatre originated in this kind of cultural climate and that the Athenian experience will continue to provide a certain paradigm of theatrical practice for the rest of Western theatrical and cultural history. By linking practice, text and cultural background in this new way, she may enhance her understanding of how the hegemonic structure of patriarchal practice was instituted in Athens.

Aristotle

The legacy of the Greeks to theatre history does not end with the theatrical practice and texts of Athens. The process known as theatre was first and lastingly articulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. This text is still taught in theatre classes as the definitive source on the nature of classical tragedy. Based on the Greek practice as we have considered it and on the kind of texts produced for it, *The Poetics* expands the patriarchal prejudice against women to the nature of the dramatic experience and to the role of the audience.

Aristotle's perspective on women can be deduced from several of his criteria regarding the nature of dramatic character in chapter 15. The Golden translation reads, 'First and foremost, character should be good . . . goodness is possible for each class of individuals. For, both a woman and a slave have their particular virtues even though the former of these is inferior to a man, and the latter is completely ignoble' (lines 2–8).[15] Or, as the passage reads in the Else translation: 'In connection with the characters . . . first and most important, that they be good . . . but goodness exists in each class of people: there is in fact such a thing as a good woman and such a thing as a good slave, although no doubt one of these classes is inferior and the other, as a class, is worthless' (lines 54a16–24).[16] Aristotle begins his prescription for the tragic character with a moral imperative. In order to be tragic, one must be good. The absence of the male in his discussion illustrates that the male citizen is the standard of good, but that this quality may even be found in others. Aristotle relates goodness to class, but, more importantly, he relates class to gender. Slaves, as a class, are comparable to women, a gender. The class hierarchy, as he suggests it, assigns the highest status to male citizens, with female citizens somewhat inferior and slaves lowest of all. Although slaves are capable of goodness, they cannot be the subjects of tragedy, because they are 'ignoble' or 'worthless'. From the extant texts we know that Greek tragedy is the province of the royal houses. Women seem to occupy an ambiguous station. Though they may be subjects of tragedy, Aristotle implies that as subjects they are inferior to males.

Goodness is only the first quality of a dramatic character within *The Poetics*. Appropriate action is the second: the tragic character

must perform actions appropriate to his character. As Else notes in his commentary, 'Appropriateness is not really a separate principle but a corollary to Aristotle's hierarchical view of goodness' (line 458). Thus, appropriateness of action is a quality of the noble character, as is goodness. Aristotle makes this point in reference to bravery and intellectual ability – characteristics appropriate to the tragic character. The Else translation reads, 'for it is possible for the character to be brave (manly) but not fitting to a woman (not by virtue of being brave or clever)' (lines 54a24–6). In the Golden translation: 'for it is possible for a person to be manly in terms of character, but it is not appropriate for a woman to exhibit either this quality or the intellectual cleverness that is associated with men' (lines 54a9–12). Else translates 'brave' and 'manly' as interchangeable terms, indicating that the male gender and bravery are one and the same. The same translation also indicates that a character is determined by gender, and that the tragic character is suited to the male gender, which connotes bravery. It is not appropriate for a woman to be manly – that is, to be brave and clever. The Golden translation does not explicitly mention bravery, but does mention 'intellectual cleverness'. Clearly, cleverness is a gender-specific quality necessary for the tragic character, but unavailable to women. Manliness, which connotes bravery to some, is another appropriate quality not to be found among women. Aristotle's assumptions rest upon the intersection of social reality and aesthetic prescriptions. In both realms, women are the outsiders. They function only to provide the limits of the male subject, which help to complete his outline, or they illustrate differences from him, which highlight his qualities. Once more, women are invisible – there are no qualities ascribed to them, and their invisibility provides the empty space which organises the focus on the male subject. In this way, they are subjects of tragic action only in so far as they might help to define the male character.

Beyond the requirements of character, however, women's supposed lack of intellectual cleverness may also exclude them from the entire experience of the drama, art or mimesis. In chapter 4, Aristotle links the act of representation to the pleasure of learning, both for the artist and for those who view his art: 'he learns his first lessons through imitation' and 'people enjoy seeing the reproductions: because in their viewing they find they are

learning, inferring what class each object belongs to' (lines 48b15–17). The pleasure of mimesis is didactic, and learning is linked to the enjoyment–reception of its product. Since cleverness is gender-specific to the male, the enjoyment of art may be restricted to his province. Historians are uncertain about the composition of the Greek theatre audience. Some reason that, since it was restricted to full citizens, it is quite possible that no women were included. Others reason that, since Euripides jests about women in the audience in some of his plays, these jests constitute evidence of women's presence. Yet others reason that Euripides's tone of irony in all that he wrote makes it impossible to admit any of his statements as evidence. Judging from the gender-specific quality of Athenian theatre and Aristotle's thoughts on tragedy, it would seem likely that women were not in the audience; or, in the context of chapter 4, that they were present but ranked as inferior. In other words, not only was the male the practitioner of theatre and the ideal tragic character: he may also have been the exclusive recipient of the theatrical experience.

Moreover, the function of thought, in Aristotle's system, is to facilitate correct choices (lines 50b5–13). The function of pity, fear and recognition is to teach audiences about correct choices and to stimulate pleasure at the recognition. Not only are women counted as lacking the cleverness required to perceive these choices, but their powers of deliberation are discounted too. This idea is clearly articulated in Aristotle's *Politics*: 'the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority'.[17] It is possible to conclude, then, that women have no need to learn about choices, since they are without the authority of choice; therefore, the drama has no function for them and they are excluded from the pleasure of watching it. Moreover, even dialogue would seem to be outside their realm – for, without authority, speaking is inappropriate, as the same passage in *The Politics* goes on to argue: 'the courage of a man is shown in commanding, but of a woman in obeying . . . as the poet says "Silence is a woman's glory", but this is not equally the glory of a man'.[18] Denied tragic qualities, cleverness, authority of deliberation and the right to speak, women seem to be excluded from the dramatic experience. The drama is not appropriate to the class of the gender of 'Woman'.

The feminist reader, identifying with her gender, finds herself

reading against this text. In fact, she discovers that she is not even intended to be a reader of it. Whatever anger she may feel in reading Aristotle's insults, or whatever pity she may feel in identifying with the excluded women of the time, seems inappropriate given the exclusivity of this textual world. At this point, the feminist finds herself defined as one without the necessary qualifications for the study or the practice of the drama. The prominence of *The Poetics* within the history of the drama and the study of that history makes the exclusion of the feminist reader even more comprehensive. The feminist reader can, however, discover the methodology and assumptions of patriarchal production. She can begin to comprehend the alliance of theatre with patriarchal prejudice. The study of its development may inform the feminist analysis of contempoary theatre, assisting in the development of strategies to expose the fiction of 'Woman' in classic texts. The feminist theatre-practitioner might, for instance, understand *Lysistrata* not as a good play for women, but as a male drag show, with burlesque jokes about breasts and phalluses, playing well in the drag tradition. The feminist director might cast a man in the role of Medea, underscoring the patriarchal prejudices of ownership and jealousy and the ownership of children as male concerns. The feminist actor may no longer regard these roles as desirable for her career. Overall, feminist practitioners and scholars may decide that such plays do not belong in the canon – and that they are not central to the study and practice of theatre.

The Elizabethan theatre

The Greek experience was replicated in the Elizabethan period in England, with the revalorisation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, conscious imitations of the classical writing-style and the assimilation of female roles by male actors. In England as in Athens, the earliest theatrical endeavours permitted some participation by women: during the Middle Ages, common women played in some local guild plays and wealthy women participated in some masques and tournaments. Yet, by the time theatre became a profession, women were once more banished from the stage. Again, this suppression of the public appearance of the female body and voice is rarely mentioned in studies of the period by historians

and critics. The evidence for the evolution of the practice is minimal. In a central scholarly text on this period, *Early English Stages*, only a passing remark offers any reason for the exclusion of women from the stage. It suggests that, in the absence of civil or ecclesiastical decrees against women actors, their exclusion is probably to be explained by the weakness of women's voices, which were less suited to outdoor or cathedral acoustics, and by their lack of training in oratory.[19] Other critics suggest that women were excluded because they did not know how to read. The former theory simply enforces the notion that something in the biological make-up of women made them unsuited to public performance. Both theories fail to account for the exclusion of women from the kinds of training necessary for the stage.

The reason for the replication of the all-male theatre lies in the re-emergence of the Athenian compound of politics, myth and culture as assimilated by the Christian tradition. The predominantly Christian culture had revised the classical fiction of the female gender by locating it within the context of sexuality. The construction of the sexual frame for women in theatre had begun centuries earlier, when the Catholic Church banned the practice of theatre as immoral. Women who performed were associated with prostitution (a legacy from Greece and Rome). By the late Middle Ages, the Church had secured the notion that such immoral sexual conduct was the province of women: that is, that prostitutes caused prostitution. Therefore the control of prostitutes would control prostitution, or, more specifically, banning women from the stage would prevent the stage from becoming the site for immoral sexual conduct. The female gender had become the custodian of male sexual behaviour, which it instigated and elicited.[20] The female body had become the site for sexuality. If women performed in the public arena, the sexuality inscribed upon their bodies would elicit immoral sexual responses from the men, bringing disorder to the social body.

The classical creation of gender as opposites added another dimension to the oppression of the female gender in this period. Within Christian thought, the association of the female gender with sexuality was opposed by the association of the male gender with spirituality, leading to the practice of male celibacy as the context for cultural production. Thus, along with the suppression of the public appearance of the female gender, its metaphorical

appearance in cultural productions became suppressed as well: the absence of women's voices in literature, philosophy, theology and other branches of learning was the counterpart of their absence from choirs and the stage. The oppositional model of gender resulted in the banning of women from the public offices of the Church, and from the schools, which during this period were all run by the Church. The equation of the female with sexuality as part of the model of gender opposites produced the condition described in *Early English Stages*: women were denied access to vocal training, the study of rhetoric and the written language. Along with the exclusion of the female gender as a cultural site and as a cultural producer, came the exclusion of the corporeal representation of sexuality, which had become associated with that gender. Without the public appearance of the female body, cultural representations of sexuality could not be physical ones. Rather, sexuality became located within the symbolic system that was the property of the spiritual domain – for instance, in language. Elizabethan theatre originated in these cultural codes and practices. Church schools and choirs supplied the first performers in this period, situating theatre within an all-male world which excluded the female–sexuality gender and practised celibacy. The stage could not be the site for corporeal representations of sexuality or desire, but must rely on language for its appearance. By the time of Shakespeare's plays, the theatre had ceased to be associated with Church-supported institutions and had moved into a secular realm of performance, but the nature of its roots was still evident.

In theatre, the sexual danger inherent in the female gender was alleviated by the male assimilation of female roles. In Shakespeare's theatre, the representation of the fiction of the female gender (and its concomitant sexuality) was assigned to boys. In fact, this period seemed to assign most theatrical performance to boys: it began with plays by choirboys and schoolboys, evolved into companies such as Shakespeare's, which employed both boys and men, and ended with the re-emergence of all-boy companies. Embedded in this intense theatrical focus on boys were certain solutions to the problem of the female–sexuality equation. In Shakespeare's theatre, certain qualities which Aristotle had earlier ascribed to women were attributed to boys. Compare this passage from Aristotle's *History of Animals* –

'the female is . . . more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive . . . easily moved to tears . . . more deceptive'[21] – to a speech in *As You Like It*. Rosalind tells Orlando how, as a boy, she had taught a man to court a woman:

> He was to imagine me his love, his mistress: and I set him every day to woo me. At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour.   (III.ii 378–89)

Boys, by virtue of their age, were cast in a social role similar to that of women – dependent on and inferior to the adult male. Women could be represented by boys on stage because they shared their social attributes.

Shakespeare played upon this Elizabethan cultural practice by foregrounding the practice of cross-gender casting in dramatic scenes of love and desire – situations his period defined as crucial to gender. Shakespeare further underscored this relationship between cross-gender casting and sexuality by his use of triple-gender-crossing in several of his comedies. In five plays (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *Cymbeline*), leading 'female' characters pretend to be male. However, Shakespeare's plays on the boy–woman exchange also participate in another sexual dynamic – the representation of male homoeroticism. These comedies of love focused on transvestite boys in erotic situations with other boys or men. The celibacy of the stage was maintained by omitting the presence of the female body and by representing physical sexuality in the language. However, the boy–woman exchange produced the erotic celebration of the boy in drag, whose language eroticised his appearance. The above quotation from *As You Like It* can be read for the alliance between cross-gender casting and homoerotic flirtation. On one level, this flirtation scene is actually played between two males: the boy actor who is playing Rosalind and the boy or man playing Orlando. On another level, a fictional woman, Rosalind, is flirting with Orlando while talking to him as if she were a boy. On a third level, the dialogue

describes a courtship game played between a boy and a male lover who imagines that the boy is a woman. The wit and titillation of the passage enhance the ability of the transvestite boy successfully to negotiate a sexual liaison with another male. The fictional 'Woman' (the character of Rosalind) simply mediates and enhances the homoerotic flirtation between two males.

Shakespeare further extends this transvestite flirtation to the audience. The same boy actor as plays Rosalind returns to deliver the epilogue, revealing himself as a boy and flirting directly with the men in the audience:

> I'll begin with the women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women . . . that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me and breaths that I defied not: and, I am sure, as many as have good beards or good faces or sweet breaths will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

After a summary tribute to heterosexuality, the boy actor reveals himself as a boy, yet continues to invoke his fictional gender as a woman to suggest that he would kiss the men. Note that he does not make any such flirtatious remark to the women in the audience – in fact, they are used only to foreground the men as the objects of desire. After his coy list of good beards, faces and sweet breaths, as the boy actor, he curtsies (an action assigned to the female gender) and exits. This epilogue illustrates a point Lisa Jardine makes in *Still Harping on Daughters*: 'Whenever Shakespeare's female characters in the comedies draw attention to their own androgyny . . . the resulting eroticism is to be associated with their maleness rather than their femaleness.'[22]

Further evidence of Shakespeare's stage as the site for homoeroticism appears in the Puritan anxiety about it. In fact, the Puritan reaction against the decadence of the stage was often related directly to this practice. While Puritan documents cannot be considered as unbiased accounts, they do provide information about both homoerotic and misogynistic anxieties of the period. Several extant Puritan sermons were built upon a quotation in Deuteronomy (22:5) which specifically forbade cross-dressing:

'The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.' The Puritans concentrated on clear gender distinctions and their relation to heterosexuality. The Puritans recorded their perceptions that boys in the female parts encouraged homoerotic responses by members of the audience who 'have been desperately enamored with Players Boys thus clad in woman's apparell, so far as to solicit them by words, by letters, etc.' (from *Histrio-mastix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedie*, 1632). Some Puritans, such as Philip Stubbes, suggested that the boys were 'Sodomites', citing their 'lewd adulterous kisses and embracements' upon the stage (*Anatomy of Abuses*, 1583). Though these reactions may have misplaced the titillation from language to physical behaviour, overlooking the function of artifice, they do record a perception that the homoerotic dynamic was employed for the entertainment of the audience.

Some traditional critics articulate this same perception in a more polite, literary context, using the framework of aesthetics to legitimate it. Harley Granville-Barker argues that Shakespeare's theatre produced a 'celibate stage'. Focusing on the absence of physical representations of sexuality, he describes *Antony and Cleopatra* as 'a tragedy of sex without one single scene of sexual appeal', further asserting that Shakespeare discovered that 'the true stuff of tragedy and of the liveliest comedy lies beyond sensual bounds'.[23] This kind of interpretation legitimises the exclusion of women from the stage and the homoerotic nature of the transvestite boy by emphasising the formality or stylisation of acting demanded by the all-male stage. The argument insists that this transvestism intensified the artifice of the stage, foregrounding its aesthetic frame. Its proponents often cite a passage from Goethe, on seeing men playing women's roles: 'the idea of imitation, the thought of art was called forth vividly . . . a kind of self-conscious illusion was produced'.[24] This patriarchal critical tradition of aestheticising male transvestitism on the stage rests upon the same principles the Church used to exclude women in the first place: that the male gender within the practice of celibacy is the appropriate site for public performance and artistic production. Aesthetics merely replaces spirituality in this formula, insisting that the male appropriation of the female role, which

stifles the physical playing of sexuality, transferring it to the symbolic system of language, is the source of the aesthetics of theatre. In other words, the argument asserts that the boy Juliet is somehow more aesthetic, more central to the practice of theatre, than a female one. Tragedy and comedy lie 'beyond sensual bounds', which means beyond the bounds of the female actor, who is sensual by nature of her gender. This is what Jan Kott more appropriately termed 'Shakespeare's bitter Arcadia', where the boy androgyne has the freedom to play the puns and tropes of homoerotic flirtation.[25]

Ironically, the feminist studies of Shakespeare which have proliferated in the last decade largely ignore this practice and its insidious implications for women. With the exception of Lisa Jardine, the scholars in question keep primarily to the earlier feminist critical practice of reading the images of women within the text, ignoring the exclusion of women actors to represent them. This approach is evident in titles such as *Shakespeare's Women, Comic Women, Tragic Men* and *The Woman's Part*. Reading within the text rather than within the practice, most of these works, concentrating on the images of independent women in the comedies and contrasting them with the negative images of women in the tragedies, characterise Shakespeare's portrayals of women as ahead of his time, or the best of his time. Though several of these works include small sections on the boy actor, few really read the implications of cross-gender casting into the text – in fact, some see the practice in a positive light: 'it results from Shakespeare's ability to see through the limitations of conventional gender expectations'; or, 'for the boy actor of female characters: playing women can itself be maturing'.[26] These feminist critics do not deconstruct the powerful misogyny found in the image of a man playing Lady Macbeth and saying 'unsex me', nor do they account for the double negative in *Twelfth Night*, in which two boys court one another, playing female characters.

Unlike the Greek audience, Shakespeare's certainly included women as well as men. Critics such as Granville-Barker would have their readers believe that women in the audience better appreciated the artifice of theatre through seeing Juliet and her nurse portrayed by a boy and an older man. It causes the modern theatre scholar to wonder how the age understood female beauty

when Cleopatra was played by a boy. Did the women perceive the stage in the way the Puritans did – as a homoerotic game? Did they become voyeurs watching the flirtations of Shakespeare's boys? What sense did women have of their own sexuality? Perhaps they concluded that the message these plays offered was that women are only sexual as boys. The doubling of cross-gender dressing in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* may have encouraged them to think that women could only woo, play and engage in sexual games as boys. After all, the endings of the comedies may be interpreted not as illustrating the way in which heterosexual marriage confirms the order of society, but as confirming that, within Shakespeare's stage practice, males marry each other, so producing a sense of narrative and dramatic closure.

What, then, does the fictional female in Shakespeare imply? Fictional 'Woman' here emerges clearly as an object of exchange between men: 'Women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another.'[27] The character of Rosalind in *As You Like It* is an object of exchange within a homoerotic economy. She is created to allow the boy actor playing her to play a boy in his flirtation scenes with Orlando. The fiction is necessary to negotiate the taboo against homosexuality, exchanging it for the value of artifice – the aesthetic of the stage. This makes the fictional female upon the stage the merchandise necessary to facilitate erotic exchange, the sex object which mediates trade between two sexual subjects. Perhaps an exploration of this level of exchange could amplify the levels of meaning in *The Merchant of Venice*, where money, exchange and marriage are clearly linked. For example, Portia's father has placed her image within one of three caskets – gold, silver and lead. Her suitors must choose the correct casket in order to attain her and her money (through her image) or remain forever celibate. The image of the woman is placed within what is in effect a vessel for currency: the male may attain sexuality through the exchange of the female image or must live the celibate life – a situation reflecting the conditions of the Elizabethan stage.

Shakespeare's stage acted out the central anxieties and codes of the period concerning sexuality and the female gender. For a while, the stage offered a cultural construction which seemed to ensconce these elements in the safety of artifice. The boy actor could enact the sex object, powerful in cross-dress, but basically

dependent. The celibacy of this stage and the dependence of the boy maintained the female sex object as one without any real power or danger. Real women were invisible in the offices of the Church, the majority of schools and standard theatrical performances. This solution began to weaken when the Catholic Church no longer dominated spirituality. The rise of the Puritans broke the solution of celibacy. The close of the theatres removed the safety of artifice. Boys no longer represented women – the fiction of the female gender was applied to real women. The cultural fictions which had served to suppress women gave way to the witch hunts, in which real women were murdered and tortured for the supposed sins of their gender. When the theatres reopened, women were allowed to play the female roles. In fact, when female actors appeared on the stage, bawdy comedies and narratives of lust began to dominate the theatres. The fiction of the female gender had been securely inscribed on real women. This age marked a transition from the virgin goddess Athena (and the virgin queen Elizabeth) to the sex goddess of the twentieth century. Either way, women did not escape the role of merchandise in the world of male exchange.