



TRANS HISTORICAL

GENDER PLURALITY BEFORE THE MODERN

EDITED BY

Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska

CHAPTER 13

Performing Reparative Transgender Identities from *Stage Beauty* to *The King and the Clown*

ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN

What work do trans narratives do in the world? How do they impact the audiences? The early 2000s saw the emergence of some new ways of telling trans stories through film. Similar to texts in other socially engaged fields, these trans narratives often aimed for ideologically appealing messages. Transgender performances tend to be billed, or perceived, as art with a cause, as a socially reparative act leading to the amelioration of personal and social circumstances. Transgender theory has strong political and ethical implications as it seeks to remedy conditions in the world. Reparative trans performances—works in which characters see their condition improve—carry substantial affective rewards by offering optimism and emotional gratification. The call for social justice may seem universal, but the exact elements requiring reparation are malleable. The reparative arcs diverge dramatically between different works.

This chapter considers two strands of reparative performance: (1) the open-ended amelioration of injustices by enabling characters' self-realization and by calling on audiences to recognize that trans bodies do not require "reparation"; and (2) narratives that showcase directive and regressive changes organized around "restoring" trans characters to perceived norms of binary gender and heterosexuality. Both approaches seek to diagnose and correct unjust conditions, though they diverge in their interpretations of the source of trouble. The first approach empowers socially marginalized

characters, while the second approach caters to (mostly) cis-heterosexual audiences' binary imaginations.

Further, both approaches are informed by the long tradition of using literature as a strategy for making sense of newly visible forms of human experience. Historically the Western canon has been given various forms of moral authority, which is why reparative performances often draw on canonical works, including, in the works I consider here, Shakespeare's plays, which are readily available reference points in popular culture. Even though Shakespeare's plays were initially performed by all-male casts, they were designed to appeal to diverse audiences. Many modern adaptations reimagine those plays through performances that explore gender nonconformity. In particular, twenty-first-century cinematic dramatizations of Renaissance cross-gender theater practices provide important commentary on transgender performance. One genre stands out in its explanatory power: films about theater-making. Depictions of gender variance and sexual fluidity in these films are enriched by gendered meanings that are simultaneously screened by cinematic devices and produced in plays-within-the-film.

Two metatheatrical films exemplify the two contrasting approaches to reparative performance. Taking the first approach to affirm its trans protagonist's right to self-determination, the South Korean blockbuster *The King and the Clown* (directed by Lee Joon-ik, Eagle Pictures, 2005) delineates the love triangle between a fifteenth-century king, a masculine jester, and his partner—a trans feminine vagabond street performer named Gong-gil. An Ophelia figure, Gong-gil presents as feminine onstage and off. Insisting that Gong-gil's trans body does not need "improvements" to fit social norms, the period drama follows an arc that carves out, sustains, and validates spaces of queerness. The reparative value of *The King and the Clown* lies in its level-headed portrayal of Gong-gil, who takes ownership of their body and social space. In contrast, other films taking the second, conservative approach, offer cis-heteronormative "corrections" of their characters. *Stage Beauty* (directed by Richard Eyre, Lions Gate, 2004), which is regarded as "a darker, bawdier version" of *Shakespeare in Love* (directed by John Madden, Universal Pictures, 1998),¹ chronicles the private life and stage career of the historical Edward (Ned) Kynaston (1640–1712), who plays exclusively female roles before taking on male roles onstage. The renowned Restoration adult "boy actor," "the last of his kind" according to the film's tagline, specializes in playing such female roles as Desdemona in *Othello*. He also presents as female in his romantic life. Eventually he "straightens up" by playing Othello onstage and by falling in love with an actress after his male lover leaves him and after King Charles II bans men from playing women.² The film moves toward forms of

cis-heterosexual normalcy, invalidating and erasing the gender nonconformity being explored in the film.

These works have not at this writing been analyzed as transgender performances, though they have been commonly studied as texts that engage (mostly male) homosexuality. The rich history of films about theater-making provides fertile ground to examine how marginalized, embodied identities are formed and contested in the representations of trans feminine characters such as Kynaston (Desdemona) in *Stage Beauty* and Gong-gil (Ophelia) in *The King and the Clown*. Kynaston and Gong-gil have been interpreted as characters with binary gender identities in film scholarship, but this chapter demonstrates how transgender performance theories can be applied fruitfully to metatheatrical works regardless of whether they have been labeled “trans” by their producers. While these gender-variant figures are located in different cultures and historical periods, the important similarities between them can help us understand transgender performance in a global context. Like the character Gong-gil, Kynaston’s life story provides a powerful framing for the idea of the artificiality of performance—of gender, of history, and of genre. The two films have one thing in common. Both Restoration English and pre-modern Korean appropriations of Shakespeare interpret trans feminine characters’ on- and offstage lives through their sexual prowess.

Following Jack Halberstam’s call for “perverse presentism,”³ a methodology that uses history to denaturalize our contemporary articulations of gender and sexuality, my case studies reclaim as trans some narratives that have historically been interpreted as homosexual in order to expand the archive for teaching and research. As Sawyer K. Kemp has proposed, “a wider range of narratives and images” can promote a more robust understanding of “the figure of trans as both a passing and nonpassing entity, a person who may be . . . dysphoric or coherent, a body that may be content or at odds with itself, a body that may be an object of desire or ridicule.”⁴ *The King and the Clown* (2005) departs from the cis-normative, reparative arc in *Stage Beauty* (2004) and from most post-1990 transgender films, which tend to follow a voyeuristic, romantically motivated trajectory toward “straightening up” nonconformist characters. By reading these two films in the context of trans cinema, this chapter makes an intervention in both transgender and Shakespeare studies by demonstrating new ways to interpret gender variance beyond just a dramatic device.

Trans Femininity and *The King and the Clown*

The King and the Clown depicts the erotic entanglements between King Yeonsan (reigned 1494–1506) and two acrobatic performers in the fifteenth-century

Joseon dynasty. Following the convention of Korea's all-male vagabond street theater, Gong-gil plays feminine roles while Jang-saeng takes on macho characters. Gong-gil, however, presents as female offstage as well. Their persona during performances turns out to be much more than just a stage role. Gong-gil remains in the gored skirt and uses feminine mannerisms in their private life.

A note on pronouns before we proceed. I use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to the jester character named Gong-gil out of respect for who the character is.⁵ The film takes Gong-gil's trans feminine identity at face value without question or scare quotes. Unlike other trans films that probe questions of being and becoming, *The King and the Clown* does not feature gender transformation scenes or dramatize the pains of transition. The film codes Gong-gil's relationship with the king as erotic and shrouds Gong-gil's relationship with the brother-like fellow jester in ambiguous terms. The director and actors, however, repeatedly refer to Gong-gil with masculine pronouns during interviews. Reviews and studies in English and Korean, to the best of my knowledge, also misgender Gong-gil via masculine pronouns.

When Gong-gil and Jang-saeng are recruited as the king's jesters in court, the narrative begins to evoke several of the themes and characters from Shakespeare's plays, including the revenge plot in *Hamlet*, the device of a bawdy play-within-a-play in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the love triangle among Viola (disguised as Cesario), Duke Orsino, and Countess Olivia in *Twelfth Night*.⁶ After the king hires the traveling players to help him appeal to the conscience of corrupt court officials, the film's version of the "mousetrap" play (the play-within-a-play that Hamlet designs to "catch the conscience of the king" who murdered Hamlet's father, 2.2.605) gradually supersedes the cinematic framework to become the primary and more arresting narrative. The king, long suspicious of his courtiers, investigates their involvement in his mother's deposition and mysterious death. Emboldened by the traveling players' allegorical performance of court intrigues and killing, the king finally takes action to avenge his mother.

Over time, the king, who is a composite figure of Hamlet and Claudius, becomes fond of the Ophelia-like Gong-gil. As a result, one of the king's consorts, Jang Nok-su, grows jealous of Gong-gil, who seems to be replacing her as the king's favorite subject, or *yi*. At the same time, Gong-gil's longtime street performance partner, Jang-saeng, is increasingly resentful about Gong-gil's special status at court. The king is clearly drawn to Gong-gil's appearance. King Yeon-san frequently asks Gong-gil to put on private finger puppet shows in his chamber. The king goes back and forth between his consort Nok-su and the jester Gong-gil, and the king's emotional needs are unclear.

In contrast to the scheming Nok-su, who functions as mother and lover, Gong-gil serves as an innocent figure who is not versed in court politics. The film thus focuses primarily on narrative tensions in the royal court among the king, Gong-gil, Nok-su, and Jang-saeng, with the king and Jang-saeng as contenders for Gong-gil's hand.

In what follows, I analyze the film from three perspectives: the identity of the trans feminine jester, their rejection of conservative "reparation," and the film's reception and relationship to other trans films. To watch video clips of the film, please visit the page I curated at *MIT Global Shakespeares*, <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/the-king-and-the-clown-lee-joon-ik-2005/>.

Trans Femininity

Of special interest in this chapter is how Gong-gil serves as a catalyst for the twists and turns of the plot. I suggest we read Gong-gil's role as a trans woman through thematic, visual, and narratological echoes of Ophelia. Like Ophelia, Gong-gil is objectified by what Laura Mulvey theorizes as the male gaze. As the love interests of leading male characters, both Gong-gil and Ophelia are styled by "the determining male gaze" that projects its voyeuristic fantasy onto them.⁷ Similar to Ophelia, Gong-gil remains innocent of sexuality and court politics. In one scene, Gong-gil is found lying in a pool of their blood after a suicide attempt. In a scene in the royal court, Gong-gil wears a Beijing opera headdress in a protracted play-within-the-film, where the flowers on their head call to mind not only Ophelia's garland and the flowers she picks but also the figure of the androgynous flower boy in Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan, which will be discussed in the following pages. As an Ophelia figure, Gong-gil is unable to express themselves and lacks inner direction. Their path in life is determined by men around them. The innocence of Gong-gil/Ophelia contrasts with the calculations and intrigues of other characters, such as the consort Nok-su, who frames them for the crime of defaming the king and the courtier who conspires to kill Gong-gil during an imperial hunt in the woods.

The King and the Clown opens with street performer Jang-saeng (Kam Woo-sung) playing macho roles and the trans feminine Gong-gil (Lee Joon-gi) taking on *yodongmo* (queen) roles. They travel from town to town and earn a miserable living as part of an all-male troupe, as audiences enjoy their shows with nominal donations (coins thrown onto the rug on which Jang-saeng and Gong-gil perform). Jang-saeng and Gong-gil perform lewd banter on a tightrope, as bawdy jokes, acrobatics, and tightrope tricks are the staples of the all-male vagabond theater known as *namsadang nori* (a UN Intangible

Cultural Heritage). Alluding to *The Taming of the Shrew*, Gong-gil plays a rude coquette while Jang-saeng's character attempts to tame her. Walking on a tightrope to the drumbeats of the musicians, the shrewish character taunts her would-be lover with lewd and provocative postures and language. The two acrobatic actors put on this bawdy show regularly with small variations throughout the film at town squares, crossroads, and eventually at the royal court. It is fitting that a film deconstructing the gender binary should draw on the metatheatrical parody of gender roles in *The Taming of the Shrew*, an elaborate play-within-a-play designed to mock the drunken peddler Christopher Sly. Jang-saeng's manhandling of Gong-gil in their show parallels the misogynist Petruchio's psychological torment of Katharina in *Shrew*. The play within *The King and the Clown* caricatures stereotypes of heterosexual femininity and masculinity to foreshadow Gong-gil's trans femininity off-stage. The camerawork (Dutch angle, close-ups of spectators' eyes) frames the rowdy lower-class audiences as the butt of the joke whose worldviews are being parodied. At this point, the film has shown Gong-gil only in their onstage persona.

The transgression of ideal femininity onstage gives way to Gong-gil's feminine identity as a restorative force offstage. There is a stark contrast between Gong-gil's onstage persona and offstage personality. Onstage, Gong-gil's character lifts her skirt, opens her legs, and speaks of checking out the manhood of Jang-saeng for size. The presence of Gong-gil's partner allows Gong-gil to present such risqué acts without being assaulted or harassed during performance. Offstage, Gong-gil is reserved, traditionally feminine, and sexually exploited. In the scene where the pair arrives jubilantly in the capital city, Hanyang (modern-day Seoul), they sample street food as they stroll along (00:17:24). A tracking shot showing Jang-saeng and Gong-gil side by side highlights the difference between their mannerisms in offstage life. Jang-saeng remains consistent with his virile onstage persona, but Gong-gil handles food in a delicate fashion. Whereas Gong-gil creates a caricature of femininity onstage (their character parodies women's desires for comedic effect), Jang-saeng walks behind random women in this scene and sways his hips in an exaggerated fashion to mock the feminine gait.

Jang-saeng harbors undefined feelings toward Gong-gil. He is clearly protective and possessive of Gong-gil. Historically, prostitution was common in the all-male vagabond troupes, but Jang-saeng uncharacteristically causes havoc when their troupe manager pimps Gong-gil out to the highest bidder, a merchant.

The scene cuts to the merchant undressing Gong-gil. In a medium close-up, the camera follows the merchant's hand down Gong-gil's naked back



FIGURE 13.1. Gong-gil on a tightrope during a street performance in *The King and the Clown*.



FIGURE 13.2. Gong-gil reveals their face under a mask on a tightrope during a street performance in *The King and the Clown*.

toward the buttock. The erotic shot is trained on Gong-gil's curves and smooth skin. The shot is thus set up to suggest Gong-gil's feminine, embodied identity even in offstage moments. Jang-saeng breaks in just before the merchant can go any further. He rescues Gong-gil, stating he is ready for them to "die together." In stark contrast to Gong-gil's onstage persona, throughout the long sequence from the altercation to the rescue, Gong-gil is completely docile and passive, allowing themselves to be handled like a doll



FIGURE 13.3. Gong-gil's character wishes to check out the manhood of Jang-saeng for size during a street performance in *The King and the Clown*.

and not saying a word or making a sound. This scene of undressing teases the film audience's curiosity about anatomy-based identities without satisfying that curiosity through recourse to the idea that genitals possess some truth about gender.

Gong-gil's trans femininity is articulated in the context of the Japanese and Korean culture of flower boys. The term "flower boy," or *kkonminam*, refers to a male-identifying singer or actor whose gender is fluidly androgynous. Above all else, the flower boy subculture highlights the youthful beauty of these singers. The factor of age is part of the positively formulated but repressive stereotypes that connect youthfulness to femininity. In contemporary Japanese and South Korean flower boy subcultures, cis-female fans—some of whom are married—live vicariously through beautiful, often androgynous characters without fear of being stigmatized as being lesbian or promiscuous.⁸ The figure of the flower boy fulfills female fans' fantasies about idealized male partners. The desire and sexuality of the female fans are complex. The fans may have queer feelings, or they may desire ideal heterosexual men who exist only in flower boy narratives. Jeeyoung Shin has identified these subcultures as "an alternative to the patriarchal mainstream culture," where homosexuality remains controversial and where female sexuality is confined to "the biological function of reproduction within marriage."⁹ Two weeks before the film's release, a promotional interview with Lee Joon-gi,¹⁰ who played Gong-gil, highlighted his feminine beauty and androgyny, which Ch'oe Kyōnghui sees as a "conscious effort to

attract female audiences . . . who would willingly consume a . . . film with a stunning *kkonminam* character.”¹¹ *The King and the Clown* emerged from such subcultures and used its connection with *kkonminam* to market itself to young female audiences.

Similar to the undressing scene, a scene in court bears further diagnostic significance. Nok-su storms in on the king and Gong-gil in an intimate moment and taunts Gong-gil about their “real” gender. Like the earlier “undressing” scene with the merchant, this scene points to voyeuristic desires that are anchored in anatomy’s putative indexicality for identities. Nok-su tries to undress Gong-gil in front of the king, creating a great deal of tension. Presumably Nok-su’s dramatic act of “gender revelation” is to expose Gong-gil as an abject subject with alleged physical deficiencies and thereby dissuade the king from bestowing further favors on Gong-gil. As in the previous undressing scene, Gong-gil does not say a word and seems rather docile in this moment when they are expected to respond to Nok-su’s pent-up anger about Gong-gil as a competitor. The king freezes in shock. Nok-su is as frustrated by Gong-gil’s version of femininity as she is jealous of the newcomer who is replacing her as the king’s favorite subject. The act of peeling the dress off Gong-gil is symbolic of her desire to authenticate embodied identities, as if to up the ante in the competition. It also reveals Nok-su’s anxiety about the king’s sexuality. The king eventually uses brute force to throw her out of the room in order to protect Gong-gil. Such revelation scenes are a familiar trope in transgender narratives. The scene peels back the polished surface of cinema—however briefly—to reveal what Timothy Murray calls “cinematic dirt,” grainy details that are best left to audiences’ imaginations.¹² These scenes are part of what Danielle M. Seid has theorized as “the reveal” in trans cinema, a device of exposure that is supposed to reveal some “bodily truth.”¹³ Such scenes subject trans characters to, as Eliza Steinbock argues, “the pressures of a pervasive gender/sex system that seeks to make public the ‘truth’ of the trans person’s gendered and sexed body.”¹⁴ Such revelation scenes reenact struggles over the body’s meanings.

Language and the use of pronouns play equally important roles in identity politics. In a scene in Nok-su’s chamber, a eunuch tells her that the king “is with her, my lady,” alluding to sex as a perennial subtext in court politics. The consort is surprised by the use of feminine pronouns to refer to Gong-gil. She asks, “Her?” When forced to clarify, the eunuch slips into biological essentialism: “That clown . . . ah . . . she’s a man, pardon me.” Nok-su angrily presses, “What is the king doing with that girly man?” It would seem Nok-su already knows the answer but wants to hear the eunuch say it. The eunuch resorts to euphemism for the king’s intimate affairs as he looks down and

says, "That . . . you know, ahem." In an aside, the eunuch muses: "Man? . . . look at what he's wearing. Man, woman, it's so damn confusing." It is important to note that, despite such disparaging comments by the consort and the eunuch, unlike *Stage Beauty* and other transgender narratives, this film shows Gong-gil exclusively in an ankle-length pink gored skirt (*chima*) with a pastel *jeogori* (the traditional blouse or shirt). As Gong-gil does not change clothes for their shows, there is no identity change to speak of. The court's assumption that Gong-gil may not have been assigned female at birth would arise from troupe members' use of pronouns and the court's knowledge of the conventional setup of all-male vagabond troupes. The conflation of gender presentation and bodily sex puts Gong-gil in a double bind as an "illusory" figure according to Talia Mae Bettcher's theory.¹⁵ If Gong-gil is perceived to be visibly trans, they would be a "pretender." If they are seen as a cis woman, they risk forced disclosure.

These interconnected scenes deploy a pornographic mode of representation by alluding to, but not showing in full, what lies beneath a character's clothes. The eroticization of Gong-gil's body in these scenes registers what Mary Ann Doane calls a "scopophilic relation."¹⁶ This relation, as Laura Mulvey points out, exists between the objectified character, male characters, and film viewers: "The woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen."¹⁷ In Gong-gil's case, curiosity about gender nonconformity is deployed to legitimize scopophilia. The gaze focuses on bodies that are coded feminine, and the pleasure derived from looking at eroticized female bodies is enabled by the voyeuristic nature of cinema. As Stanley Cavell theorizes, films are "inherently pornographic" because of the audiences' privileged invisibility while "looking in on a private world" and "the ontological conditions of the motion picture." As an object that is dressed, the human body on-screen has the potential to be undressed. The cinema—with its nonreciprocal structure of viewing—has the power to incite and channel the desire to see a human being undressed. As a result, audiences unconsciously look for a reason for undressing "desirable human beings" in films.¹⁸ Gender clearly plays a role in scopophilia, as feminist scholarship has astutely pointed out. As Mulvey argues, cinema as a genre facilitates the objectification of female characters and the voyeuristic conditions (gazing without being seen either by those on-screen or by other film audiences), thereby satisfying "a primordial wish for pleasurable looking."¹⁹ Trans bodies on-screen—in comparison to cis and normative bodies—bear the additional stress of an authentication process based on the assumed indexicality of

anatomical features. It doesn't help, either, that the technological apparatus of cinema tends to support normative systems of gender "that shaped its classical narrative syntax."²⁰

The trans identity of Gong-gil has been overlooked by scholarship and deliberately repressed by Korean audiences, who more readily accept heterosexuality—even if practiced between a cis and a trans character—than homosexuality. The strongest evidence of Gong-gil's trans identity comes from rehearsal notes. Lee Joon-gi, who played Gong-gil, identifies as a cis man but says in interviews that he conceived his character as a trans woman. He recounted going with the film director to "special bars" to "study the attitude of trans people." Lee adopted Method acting—an immersive, emotion-oriented technique derived from Konstantin Stanislavski in which an actor identifies fully with their character. To prevent Lee from being separated from the role of Gong-gil, the film director forbade him from interacting with other actors when not on the set. He remained in his role during breaks in filming. Lee went so far as to "shut himself in a ladies' room . . . to immerse himself in his role as Gong-gil" at the studio.²¹ When making choices about the character, the actor and director operated in a binary framework. Despite Lee's misconception of transgender life as superficial, adoptable behaviors in a trans bar, *The King and the Clown* does not convey such problematic views. Gong-gil, in their offstage life, does not mimic or parody stereotypical versions of femininity.

The film's construction of trans embodiment and queer space merits critical attention. Jang-saeng and Gong-gil work seamlessly as a flirtatious heterosexual couple onstage and share the same bed in their private life. The film remains ambiguous about the nature of their relationship: sharing intimate space as an act of necessity due to poverty, a sign of something beyond a brotherly bond, or both. In the historical context of the narrative, heterosexual vagabond artists would have limited opportunities and choices when it came to personal relationships on account of their poverty and low social status. Jang-saeng may be a heterosexual or bisexual cis man who forms emotional bonds with a trans feminine partner. It is debatable whether Gong-gil is a less-than-perfect but serviceable surrogate for Jang-saeng's sexual needs, or a younger sibling figure whom Jang-saeng takes under his wing. The familial setting is partly a function of Korean queer film traditions. As Chris Berry notes, East Asian queer cinema often articulates selfhood through "kinship obligations" in blood or simulated familial bonds.²² The bonds—expressed in positive or negative terms—bring characters such as Jang-saeng and Gong-gil together in marginalized social spaces that are invisible to most members of their society. Queer films make their life and culture visible.

Rejection of Conservative “Reparation”

The film ends with Gong-gil’s rejection of any fantasy the film audiences may have about reparation of trans bodies. Instead of the redemption that is more typical of other trans films, the final scene of *The King and the Clown* counteracts all the previous teasing scenes of undressing and “gender revelation.” Coming full circle, the two jesters find themselves on the tightrope again in the final scene. In the preceding scene, Jang-saeng is blinded by the king’s guards over false accusations of his disloyalty. A court official sympathetic to Jang-saeng releases him, but Jang-saeng cannot leave without Gong-gil. He returns to perform one final act on a tightrope in the courtyard facing the king’s sleeping chamber. Jang-saeng sings that he sees worldly affairs with more clarity now that he is blind. Gong-gil—despite their position as the king’s new favorite subject—abandons the king in his chamber to join Jang-saeng on the tightrope. Their performance morphs into mutual confessions in which they renew their dedication to each other. Gong-gil chooses Jang-saeng over the king, knowing that they would now be prosecuted along with Jang-saeng. As the king’s soldiers approach the inner courtyard, Jang-saeng and Gong-gil—standing at opposite ends of the tightrope—prepare to die by asking each other what they would like to be in their next life. Gong-gil vows to be reborn in exactly the same body. From the character’s perspective, there is nothing about their body that needs to be corrected. The film concludes with a freeze-frame of the two jesters jumping up simultaneously on the tightrope, which suggests but does not show the characters’ ultimate doom.

Gong-gil’s decision is an element that distinguishes *The King and the Clown* from other trans films. Gong-gil is neither in flamboyant drag nor struggling with what some films depict as gender “transition.” They appear to simply live in their social role without being questioned. They are not dysphoric or in struggle to “perform” their gender. Instead they seem at ease and desirable. Unlike Gong-gil, who wishes to be reborn in exactly the same body, characters in many films featuring trans protagonists share an investment in surgical and medical interventions as an endpoint for viewers’ voyeuristic pleasure. *The King and the Clown* supports the idea that social and medical transitions are not predicated upon each other. Surgery as a topic in and by itself in films with trans protagonists is not an issue, however. When accessible without “gatekeeping protocols . . . aim[ing] at restrict[ing] access to care,” surgical interventions can be empowering tools and self-actualizing practices for individuals, but cinematic constructions that fetishize reconstructive surgery in imaginings of trans and queer life

are problematic because, in that context, the cinematic gaze looking at the trans body is fixated on its anatomy.²³ In untangling the love triangle in its denouement, *The King and the Clown* does not privilege, as *Stage Beauty* does, heterosexual norms in romantic love as reparative of queer desires either. *The King and the Clown* enables its central trans feminine character to simply exist as themselves without justification. *The King and the Clown* does not fall into the trap of what Sara Ahmed has called “a queer politics of unhappiness,” a tendency among queer films to fetishize or aestheticize the suffering of sexual minorities who are forced to “live with the consequences of being an unhappiness-cause for others.”²⁴ Ahmed has theorized that the de rigueur unhappy endings of queer narratives—a result of social imposition and self censorship—are tolerated by queer communities for the sake of increased visibility, because “more important was the fact there was a new book about us.”²⁵ In this light, the tragicomic *King and the Clown* succeeds as an atypical trans narrative by sustaining queer space.

Reception and Context

With a budget of \$6 million, *The King and the Clown* was a box-office hit in South Korea (\$85 million), where it grossed more than *Titanic* (1997) and *Avengers: Infinity Wars* (2018). It was seen by more than 12 million people—a quarter of the Korean population. The feature film’s queer valences and its enthusiastic reception throughout East Asia mark a significant milestone in New Korean Wave (*hallyu*) cinema (2007–2012).²⁶ *Hallyu* refers to the global popularity of South Korea’s music (such as K-pop), television dramas, and films.

The King and the Clown is one of the rare films with a trans protagonist to go mainstream. Interestingly, despite its high profile, the film has not been commonly identified as a trans film in East Asia. The director has made numerous public statements that *The King and the Clown* is not a gay film and kept Gong-gil an enigmatic character who does not offer any explicit statements about their gender or sexual identity.²⁷ While it is undeniable that the trans character Gong-gil is gendered as feminine for the king’s desiring and controlling “male gaze,” the film keeps fluid the sexuality of the male characters around Gong-gil.²⁸ Depending on what the men think Gong-gil is, the male gaze can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. It is clear, however, that the film studio sought to fulfill the fantasy of its target audience: young female filmgoers. Gong-gil’s soft-spoken mannerisms, smooth pale skin, gored skirt, and hairdo with a bow exemplify “the female fantasy of the

ideal gay man.”²⁹ It is important to note that the film did draw a significant number of older audiences as well. According to Chung Jin-wan, head of Eagle Pictures, 18 percent of the audience was over forty years old.³⁰

The director’s use of the Korean term *gei* (gay) merits further scrutiny. Before acquiring its contemporary meaning of homosexual men, the term *gei* referred to “a male-bodied person” who wears skirts or adopts dainty mannerisms, such as covering their mouth when giggling. It also referred to transgender individuals “who did not have gender affirmation surgery,” according to Han Chae-yun’s study.³¹ Because of its continued malleability, “gay” is an umbrella term for sexual minorities in Korea. In the United States, the UK, France, and Germany, however, *The King and the Clown* is often regarded as a gay-themed film primarily on the basis of the subdued erotic bond between the two jesters.³² Throughout the film, heterosexual intimacy between the king and his cis consort is explicitly shown in multiple scenes, but the only potentially homoerotic scene is a brief on-screen kiss between the king and his female-presenting jester Gong-gil, who is unconscious at the time. The *Guardian* identifies these features as part of the film’s “muted gay storyline.”³³ In China, though, the film is banned on account of “the homosexual code” and “sexually explicit language in the film,” according to the film’s distributor CJ Entertainment.³⁴ Writing for the *New York Times*, Norimitsu Onishi compared the success of *The King and the Clown* to that of *Brokeback Mountain* (directed by Ang Lee, 2005).³⁵ The tendency to misread the love triangle as a gay relationship is understandable, for the film appeared one year after homosexuality was removed from the Korean Youth Protection Commission’s list of socially unacceptable acts in 2004. For many viewers and critics, it can be difficult to resist the tendency to map what is uncategorizable (Gong-gil’s identity) onto what one already knows (the gay rights movement). So *The King and the Clown* is misconceived as the Korean answer to the iconic *Brokeback Mountain*. The film director’s capacious use of the term *gei* (gay) is lost on Western viewers. The linguistically marked transgender meanings (*gei*, gay, *kkonminam*, flower boys) are also lost in translation. The film’s subtitles often gloss over nonbinary meanings, such as Gong-gil’s pronouns. Subtitles are as much filtering devices as they are heuristic tools, giving the false impression that cinematic meanings are conveyed primarily through verbal messages instead of via blocking, lighting, costumes, characterization, and other elements. Both transgender narratives and translational practices are governed by the “divisions of language [and] the body . . . in ways that confound orderly linguistic categories.”³⁶

The film's title in both Korean (*Wang-ui namja*) and Taiwanese releases (*Wang de nanren*, *The King's Man*) cements the king's possession of Gong-gil not as his clown but as his male consort. Notably the English title, *The King and the Clown*, does not feature the possessive form. It puts the king and Gong-gil on equal footing, and it keeps Gong-gil's identity gender-neutral.

It is important to note that, prior to *The King and the Clown*, there had been other, more explicitly transgender-themed films from South Korea, though none of them garnered a similar level of public attention. All of them have been set in the contemporary period. *Man on High Heels* (directed by Jang Jin, 2014) is a noir film featuring a revered macho homicide detective who is a closeted trans woman. She resigns from her job in order to go through gender affirmation surgery. *Like a Virgin* (directed by Lee Hae-jun and Lee Hae-young, 2006) chronicles the life of a transgender teenage girl who takes on folk wrestling (*ssireum*) to raise money for gender affirmation surgery. Her true passion, however, lies in dancing and mimicking Madonna's singing. Set in Seoul's international district, Itaewon, *Does the American Moon Rise over Itaewon?* (directed by Yoon Sam-yuk, 1991) created a sensation for featuring a transgender striptease club performer played by Oh Yoon-hee, the country's first openly trans feminine actor. Also set in Itaewon, the gory *Mascara* (directed by Lee Hoon, 1995) follows a transgender hostess's love life and revenge on her rapists after she successfully undergoes gender affirmation surgery.³⁷ Notably several 1990s LGBTQ films were set in Itaewon, one of the well-known hotspots for sexual minorities in the 1990s and now home to expatriates and US military personnel.³⁸

Similar to *The King and the Clown*, both *Mascara* and *Does the American Moon Rise over Itaewon?* depict the hardship faced by transgender characters who are stereotypical social outcasts doing anything for money since they do not have access to legal work. While the depictions are realistic and not judgmental, they do walk in step with stereotypes, reinforcing "a bourgeois audience's . . . view of transgender immorality."³⁹

The King and the Clown, however, stands out in LGBTQ cinema for its unique nonjudgmental and atypical narrative arc. While Gong-gil may be marginalized, they are not socially alienated; they are accepted as a feminine person by characters of high and low social status. Gong-gil's gender presentation is consistently perceived as feminine in private life and onstage without any transition scenes.

Sexuality is another topic of contention in contemporary Korean films. It is coupled with positive biases about youth, such that a trans feminine person's or character's youthfulness intervenes in positive ways in societal acceptance of trans identity. In both films at issue here, age is an important

vector of identity; youthfulness and femininity have become intertwined identity markers. *The King and the Clown* frames its central character Gong-gil's love story as a heterosexual one. This normalization strategy makes trans identity more palatable to Korean audiences who reject homosexuality but readily accept younger, heterosexual trans women, who enjoy what the dominant culture regards as "passing" privileges. Used frequently by popular media, "passing" is a misconception, because it implies that one's identity is not authentic and that one is merely "mistaken" for something one is not.⁴⁰ The idea of "passing" is subjective and flawed.

The tendency to reject homosexuality but accept younger, heterosexual, conventionally attractive trans individuals is evident in a number of milestone events in South Korea at the turn of the millennium. In 2000, the actor Hong Suk-cheon came out as gay and lost his livelihood. All television shows and studios shunned him overnight. Amidst public uproar, the first openly gay celebrity left the entertainment industry to change careers. The 2004 "Asian hero" of *Time* magazine, Hong became—in various periods of his life—a restaurateur, a fashion arts professor, and a Democratic Labor Party candidate for public office.⁴¹ In contrast, Harisu (punning on "Hot Issue"), the stage name of Lee Kyung-eun, has enjoyed great success and a high level of acceptance both before and after she came out as a trans woman in 2001. It is important to note that, in the context of age and societal acceptance, Harisu came out when she was twenty-six and was in a heterosexual marriage with Micky Jung from 2007 to 2017. While there are practically no openly homosexual actors, there have been several high-profile heterosexual trans feminine singers and models in the footsteps of Harisu. The year 2005 saw the debut of the first trans feminine K-pop band Lady, who cited Harisu as an inspiration. The four singers of Lady are deemed conventionally attractive. All four women, in their late teens and early twenties at the time of their debut, have openly discussed their heterosexuality and their gender affirmation surgeries. Catering to heterosexual male fans, the band even released an album featuring nude shots of its four members in the genre of *shashinshū* (photo book) popularized by Japanese pop culture. As K. S. Yoo theorizes, contemporary Korean society prioritizes sexuality over gender identity in its placement of an individual in a social hierarchy. Same-sex relationships are deemed more deviant than heterosexual ones regardless of the gender identities of the parties involved. Even a heterosexual couple consisting of a cis and a trans partner, for example, would be more acceptable than a homosexual couple of any combination of gender identities.⁴² Along similar lines, Jeeyoung Shin argues that *The King and the Clown* uses subtexts such as court politics to distract audiences from what may be

perceived to be a gay theme.⁴³ The image of Gong-gil reflects how Korean audiences seem to imagine heteronormative trans life, as in the cases just discussed, such as that of Harisu.

Trans Femininity and *Stage Beauty*

The theme of flower boys' gender nonconformity in *The King and the Clown* invokes the historical reality of early modern English boy actors. There are multiple cases of successful boy actors, such as Richard Robinson (1595–1648) and Edward Kynaston (1643–1712), who played female roles on stage and then transitioned to playing male roles when they grew up. The life stories of these actors presented boyhood as androgynous and gender fluid, but interestingly, as Simone Chess notes, they carried a “queer residue” with them into male adulthood, and they continued to perform feminine or androgynous roles⁴⁴ Kynaston is probably the best-known example in modern times, thanks to Samuel Pepys's diary (August 1660)⁴⁵ and the 2004 feature film *Stage Beauty*, directed by Richard Eyre, a former director of the UK's National Theatre. The film depicts Edward “Ned” Kynaston as presenting as female offstage.

Based on Jeffrey Hatcher's play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, the film *Stage Beauty* centers on the question “Who am I?” in the career and private life of Billy Crudup's character Ned Kynaston, one of the last Restoration adult “boy actors” who exclusively played female roles⁴⁶ The film explores the boundaries between cross-gender casting (Kynaston as Desdemona), drag (Kynaston's playful female persona in private life), proto-trans (Kynaston's male lover's statement), and transgender identities (Kynaston's statement about himself). Whereas *The King and the Clown* presents Gong-gil as they are without explanatory justification or stereotypical gender transition scenes, *Stage Beauty* recruits the audience to participate in Kynaston's affective labor toward becoming who the society thinks he “should” be. The film “redeems” Kynaston by having him straighten up through a “reparative arc” from a trans feminine person with a male lover to a cis man in love with a cis woman, Maria. Kynaston presents as both male and female on- and offstage as the narrative unfolds, and his agony and trepidation when in drag stand in stark contrast to his later, “naturalized” role as a heterosexual cis man on stage and in private life.

When Kynaston is still playing female roles, multiple scenes offer close-up shots of him applying facial makeup and fitting a wig. After the show, the camera follows Kynaston to his dressing room to witness him transforming out of drag, or “shed[ing] his skin,” as he puts it. Even after he removes his

wig, he continues to use practiced feminine mannerisms. Quoting the acting master who has trained him to play female parts from a young age, Kynaston states that he is told never to forget he is “a man in woman’s form,” but he is beginning to think perhaps it is “the other way around.” Kynaston’s statement about being a woman in a man’s body echoes a now outdated convention of trans self-narratives about being “trapped” in the gender identity assigned at birth.

Scenes of gender transition and ambiguity in the film are designed to evoke cinematic voyeuristic pleasure. Whereas Gong-gil consistently performs female roles and presents as female offstage, Kynaston performs female parts for only half of his career. Both Gong-gil and Kynaston are actors of low social status who maintain romantic relationships with more powerful, aristocratic male characters. Kynaston is a well-known actor, and his onstage gender identity and sexuality permeate his life. He presents as female in bed with his dominant lover George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham (Ben Chaplin). They meet regularly in the theater where Kynaston performs. As Kynaston approaches the duke, he brushes off Kynaston’s affectionate feminine gestures, insisting that Kynaston wear a wig before coming to bed. Kynaston retorts playfully, “Do you ask your lady whores to wear a wig to bed?” alluding to the duke’s sexually promiscuous lifestyle. Kynaston wishes to know why the duke treats his cisgender sexual partners differently from him. The duke explains that the wig is necessary to make Kynaston “more of a woman.” Alluding to the destructive nature of erotic desires and the Renaissance trope relating orgasm and death, the duke says to Kynaston, “I like to see a golden flow [of hair] as I die in you.” There is also a connection among sex, death, and stage performance of femininity. Once the film audience realizes that the two lovers are on Desdemona’s deathbed, it becomes explicit that the duke desires Kynaston’s ability to perform feminine submission in his love life. In a later scene, the duke states further, “When I did spend time with you, I always thought of you as a woman.” Indeed Kynaston takes great pride in his portrayal of the murder of Desdemona (“women die beautifully”). As Sawyer Kemp observes, “male-to-female cross-casting” is often used to “downplay sexist violence.”⁴⁷ Kynaston aestheticizes the masculinist killing of women in his stage performance.

There is an irony in their relationship, however. Their illicit encounters—carefully kept under wraps—always take place onstage after Kynaston’s evening performance. This is parallel to Gong-gil’s relationship with the king discussed earlier, in which Gong-gil is always asked to put on private shadow plays or finger puppet shows for the king. They converse in a coded manner under the guise of discussing theater works. In *Stage Beauty*, after the

audiences clear the auditorium, Kynaston leaves the role of Desdemona behind only to return in the same costume to the same bed and stage set where he, as Desdemona, has just been murdered. Waiting for Kynaston in bed is the duke. The setting of the stage gives their relationship a theatrical quality. The duke's insistence on Kynaston's donning wigs and dresses further accentuates the idea that Kynaston puts on a second show each evening, a private show for an audience of one on a public stage. It is a private act in a public space. One evening there is a voyeur, Maria Hughes (Claire Danes). An admirer of Kynaston, Maria works for him as his dresser. In one scene Maria watches from the wings in horror, heartbroken, as Kynaston has sex with the duke in the bed onstage. It is clear that Maria is interested in Kynaston romantically. Maria has been an "obsessed spectator" during Kynaston's theatrical performances. Thoroughly familiar with the script and dreaming of acting, Maria watches from backstage and mouths every line Kynaston's Desdemona speaks. Now, in the second "show" of the evening, Maria steps into the role of an "illicit observer" who, like Othello, receives "ocular proof" of Kynaston's betrayal in a taboo sexual act.⁴⁸ When Maria sees that Kynaston is interested in men, her hope of attracting Kynaston is shattered. From her position of a voyeur, Maria "grossly gape[s] on, behold [Kynaston/Desdemona] topped" (*Othello* 3.3.395–96).

In fact, Kynaston maintains this secret romantic relationship as a woman only until King Charles II arranges a heterosexual marriage for the duke. Just like Desdemona and Gong-gil, Kynaston's body is gendered for the male



FIGURE 13.4. After playing Desdemona onstage, Kynaston takes off his wig backstage in *Stage Beauty*.



FIGURE 13.5. After the audience clears the auditorium, Kynaston returns to Desdemona's bed onstage to meet the Duke of Buckingham in *Stage Beauty*.

gaze. The duke looks *through* rather than *at* Kynaston's female persona. He subsumes Kynaston within a hetero-masculinist image of female suffering. Kynaston and Gong-gil are deemed desirable objects because they fulfill male fantasies of "feminine subjugation," a notion Kynaston teaches his apprentice Maria as she learns the role of Desdemona.

Kynaston's adventures do not stop there. After another successful performance one evening, two aristocratic female fans invite him—still in makeup, petticoat, and dress—on a carriage ride. They reveal during the ride that their real purpose is to settle a wager about Kynaston's genitalia. They claim to be asking on behalf of others around them: "My father says you're much too beautiful to be a gentleman. . . . My mother's good friend, the Earl of Lauderdale, says if you're a man, you don't have a gentleman's thingy. He says you're like those Italian singers." The essentialist conversation zeroes in on Kynaston's anatomy: "The earl says they cut off your, uh, castrati, and you become a woman." Kynaston responds cheerfully and flirtatiously. Batting his eyelashes, he grasps the ladies' hands and directs them under his skirt toward his groin. Without letting them actually touch him, Kynaston assures them of his possession of a "big, bulging orb-and-scepter of a thingy." The ladies insist, "We'd have to touch it." It is unclear what happens next, but a series of reaction shots show the two gentlewomen breathless and Kynaston moaning in pleasure. In this scene, drag seems comedic because Kynaston turns it into a political act that parodies the two ladies' binary visions. The self-referentiality of drag, an imitation that Jennifer Drouin glosses as

“almost but not quite” right (following Homi Bhabha’s formulation), draws attention to the artifice of gendered bodies in performance. In contrast, Gong-gil’s embodied identity is “neither parody nor an intentional exposure of normativity.”⁴⁹ It is not an act but lived reality.

The film depicts a second attempt at a genitalia check soon afterward. Before they exit the carriage and part ways with one another, Kynaston and the two gentlewomen are confronted by Sir Charles Sedley (Richard Griffiths). Having mistaken them for three female prostitutes, Sedley approaches them for their prices. He corners Kynaston and gropes under his skirt to discover what Kynaston calls “a guardian at the gate.” Gender is presented here as an artifice and a series of loosely connected symbols. Kynaston’s presence disrupts binary gender categories. Kynaston does not so much “pass” as a woman (in his fans’ words) as passes through the interstitial space between categories.

The duke’s attachment to such gendered accessories as the wig and the two women’s and Sedley’s fascination with Kynaston’s genitalia hark back to similar scenes of “trans revelation” in *The King and the Clown*. The “gender reveal” scenes in both films echo Talia Mae Bettcher’s argument that the misconception of an anatomical reality of gender casts trans people as “evil . . . make-believers,” locking them into being either a visible pretender or an invisible deceiver to be forcefully exposed at some point. Either way they are seen as “fundamentally illusory.”⁵⁰ Will Fisher’s research shows that “gendered accessories” such as codpieces and handkerchiefs and sartorial differences played key roles in early modern⁵¹ and Galenic conception of gender.⁵² Kynaston pushes back on the idea that the wig alone makes him a woman, and rejects—while humoring with a sense of playfulness—other characters’ request for genital verification. Unlike the passive Gong-gil, Kynaston takes control in these “trans revelation” scenes. Despite their depiction of Kynaston’s agency in self-determination, these scenes inadvertently encourage “spectators to fixate variously on the surface and on the imagined body beneath.” As Elizabeth Klett theorizes, “Any attempts to fix gender on the cross-dressed . . . body are always . . . prosthetic.”⁵³ In particular, films that depict gender variance in theater making foster a dual consciousness in their audiences: the simultaneous awareness of identities manufactured onstage and filtered by cinematic devices—an awareness that Gong-gil and Kynaston can both be themselves and be playing a role.

After King Charles II lifts the ban on actresses and bans men from performing female roles, Kynaston is bereft of both his roles and his identity. The royal decree marks a key moment “in the emergence of a new proto-Stanislavskian paradigm of acting,” outlawing Kynaston’s intricately stylized

representation of women.⁵⁴ At a loss, he tells his protégée Maria that he does not want to play men, for they are “not beautiful” and “do nothing beautifully.” He disapproves of Maria’s wish to play female parts, asking, “A woman playing a woman, where’s the trick in that?” Eventually Kynaston reluctantly takes Maria on as an apprentice. As he coaches Maria on “the five positions of feminine subjugation,” it becomes clear that he sees femininity as a series of practiced stylized gestures. In contrast, Maria takes a naturalist-realist approach to performance, emphasizing her inalienable right to perform “more authentic” representations of women onstage simply because she is assigned female at birth. Both Maria’s and Kynaston’s approaches to performing female roles are reductive and essentialist. Kynaston’s and Maria’s contest for ownership of Desdemona becomes the backbone of the film’s narrative and scopic power.

In his private life, Kynaston also goes through a very difficult period after losing his job. He is beaten by Sir Charles Sedley’s henchmen, who call him a “bum boy” who is “mocking your betters.” Kynaston is severely injured. As Cameron McFarlane writes, without the stage roles that have come to define him as an actor and a person, Kynaston “is reduced to a kind of gender freak.”⁵⁵ Patriarchal institutions govern acceptable expressions of femininity. As has been noted by theorists such as Julia Serrano, who calls the phenomenon “scapegoating of femininity,” the patriarchy focuses its energy on guarding the superiority of masculinity. Trans feminine identity devalues masculinity by rejecting it. The presence of Kynaston creates a category crisis by challenging putative binary distinctiveness of gender. Further, it poses what is known in social identity theory as distinctiveness threat. When a group sees the boundaries defining their identity as indispensable, they feel threatened when these putatively definitional boundaries are blurred.

The key event in the “straightening up” of Kynaston’s gender and sexual nonconformity is his rupture with his boyfriend. Kynaston meets with the duke to ask why Buckingham has not visited him since his injury at the hands of the gang hired by Sir Charles Sedley. He attempts, as he does in the past, playful affection, but the duke rejects him. Upon learning that the duke is marrying a cis woman, Kynaston presses in a competitive tone: “What is she like in bed? What is she like to kiss?” The duke eventually acknowledges that he valued their relationship as no more than a performance, a fetish: “When we were in bed, it was always in a bed onstage. I’d think, here I am in a play, inside Desdemona, Cleopatra, poor Ophelia. You’re none of them now. I don’t know who you are. I doubt you do.” Now that Kynaston no longer plays women onstage, the duke cannot accept him as he is: “I don’t want you!

What you are now.” It becomes clear that Kynaston is a temporary substitute in bed until the duke lands a cis partner.

After the breakup, Kynaston begins playing Othello in blackface and embarks on a more aggressive “therapeutic” arc. Some trans masculine characters, such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, see their sexuality erased by circumstance. Disguised as pageboy Cesario in Illyria, Viola is forced to conceal her romantic yearning for Duke Orsino while being courted by Countess Olivia. In other cases, trans feminine characters, such as Gong-gil and Kynaston, are pressured by characters around them for binary clarifications of their sexuality. Kynaston “becomes a man” by mastering the craft of killing a woman onstage and by performing intimate acts in bed with his former dresser and current rival Maria, who now plays Desdemona. Toward the end of the film, Kynaston’s “reparative” turn from the duke to Maria “looks disturbingly like the sexual conversion of a man from gay to straight.”⁵⁶ The “reparation” of Kynaston follows a romantically motivated trajectory toward cis-heterosexual normalcy.

Towards a Capacious Theory

Both *The King and the Clown* and *Stage Beauty* teeter cautiously along various lines of gender expression and sexuality in their respective cultures without giving a name to gender transgressions in the narratives, commercializing queerness by introducing “narrative tension . . . without directly challenging the culture of heteronormative familialism.”⁵⁷ The filmmakers have their own financial or ideological reasons for de-emphasizing, in their public statements, nonconformist aspects of their films, but it is important, from an archival point of view, to recover the trans signification of these performances that have been designated otherwise in the service of heteronormative ideologies. I treat the heterosexual trans body and non-trans sexually queer body as objects for inclusive analysis in an expanding repertoire of trans performance. By applying transgender theory to performance criticism, we can reclaim elements that have been lost to our collective trans archive. In an effort to excavate hitherto unknown trans narratives by expanding the archives we work from, I am cognizant of the risk of imposing trans as a contemporary category onto works set in Restoration England (*Stage Beauty*) or premodern Korea (*The King and the Clown*) which portray bodies that “did not yet exist under the sign of trans*.”⁵⁸ The fact, however, that trans characters such as Gong-gil (“transvestitism [was] common” among pre-modern vagabond actors)⁵⁹ or Edward Kynaston (a female-presenting adult “boy actor”) live under different labels does not invalidate their trans experiences.

These films and their reception reveal that transgender communities past and present have included a wide range of identities, many of which may be an inconvenient truth not only for the conservatives but also, as the case may be, for activists who may selectively focus on identities that more directly support their causes. As trans characters, Gong-gil and Kynaston re-inscribe the sexed body into social-constructivist discourses about gender while simultaneously countering the idea that anatomy is their destiny. Both narratives challenge essentialist ideas that sustain oppression based on binary models of gender. *Stage Beauty* showcases processes of gendered “becoming.” *The King and the Clown* enables its central trans feminine character to simply exist as herself without justification. *The King and the Clown* registers multiple ways in which trans identities are constructed, and it participates in the “regional production of trans meanings that negotiates between local subjectivities and globalized categories.”⁶⁰

By reading narratives of flower boys (Gong-gil) and adult boy actors (Kynaston) as trans feminine and nonbinary, we build a more capacious theoretical model to elucidate not only performance histories of sexual transformation but also less explicit representations of trans identities in gender-fluid performances.

Notes

I wish to thank Simone Chess for her intellectual generosity and insightful feedback.

1. Bert Cardullo, *Screening the Stage* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 254. See also Sarah Martindale, “Shakespearean Film as Art Cinema: *Stage Beauty* as a Cerebral Retort to Hollywood,” in *British Art Cinema: Creativity, Experimentation and Innovation*, ed. Paul Newland and Brian Hoyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

2. David Alderson, “Acting Straight: Reality TV, Gender Self-Consciousness and Forms of Capital,” *New Formations* 83 (2014): 7–24; John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

3. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 45–74.

4. Sawyer K. Kemp, “Transgender Shakespeare Performance: A Holistic Dramaturgy,” *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19.4 (Fall 2019): 265–83, quotation at 268.

5. While now widely accepted and used, singular gender-neutral pronouns were initially seen by some as controversial.

6. Adele Lee, Nafees Ahmed, and Antara Basu, among others, have identified key Shakespearean references in the film. Adele Lee, “The Player King and Kingly Players: Inverting *Hamlet* in Lee Joon-ik’s *King and the Clown* (2005),” *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 12.1 (Fall 2018), <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/784121/show> (accessed January 10, 2020); Nafees Ahmed, “The

King and the Clown (2005) Review: A Shakespearean Tragedy," *High on Films*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.highonfilms.com/the-king-and-the-clown-2005-review/> (accessed April 14, 2020); Antara Basu, "Film Review: *The King and the Clown*," *The Medium*, May 21, 2017, <https://medium.com/@antarabasu/film-review-the-king-and-the-clown-2005-c76bc6816bf1> (accessed April 30, 2020).

7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

8. Mark McLelland, "The Love between 'Beautiful Boys' in Japanese Women's Comics," *Journal of Gender Studies* 9.1 (2000): 13–25.

9. Jeeyoung Shin, "Male Homosexuality in *The King and the Clown*: Hybrid Construction and Contested Meanings," *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.1 (Spring 2013): 89–114, quotation at 100.

10. The name is also spelled as Yi Chun'gi in articles using the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization.

11. Ch'oe Kyŏnghúi, "Chorong tanghal surok sesang ún chúlǵōwōjinda" [The more ridiculed, the merrier the world becomes], www.movist.com, December 29, 2005, <http://www.movist.com/article/read.asp?type=32&id=11293>; quoted in English in Shin, "Male Homosexuality in *The King and the Clown*," 101.

12. Timothy J. Murray, *Like a Film: Ideological Fantasy on Screen, Camera and Canvas* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 104, 106–7.

13. Danielle M. Seid, "Reveal," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1–2 (2014): 176.

14. Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 4.

15. Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia* 22.3 (2007): 50, 59.

16. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 88.

17. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

18. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979), 44–45.

19. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

20. Damon R. Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

21. Interview with Lee Joon-gi, MBC Goldfish Talk Show, April 29, 2009, script published on a fandom website About My Jun, http://aboutmyjun.blogspot.com/2009/05/20090429-lee-jun-ki-mbc-goldfish_22.html?m=1 (accessed May 1, 2020).

22. Chris Berry, "Asian Values, Family Values," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40.3–4 (2001): 211–31, quotation at 213.

23. Eric Plemons and Chris Straayer, "Introduction: Reframing the Surgical," special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5.2 (May 2018): 164–73, quotation at 165–66.

24. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 89 and 109.

25. *Ibid.*, vii.

26. Jin Dal Yong, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 68–90.

27. “Bonus Features,” *The King and the Clown*, directed by Joon-ik Lee (CJ Entertainment, 2006), DVD, Special Limited Edition DTS, four discs.

28. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

29. Jungmin Kwon, “Spectacularizing the Homosexual Body: The Secret Rendezvous among Global Gay Media, Local Straight Women, and the Media Industry in South Korea” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014), 136.

30. *Korea Times*, March 5, 2006.

31. Han Chae-yun, “Korean Lesbian Community History” [Hanguk rejeubieon keomyuniti-ui yeoksa], *Progressive Review [Jinbopyeongron]* 49 (2011): 100–128.

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54. Cary M. Mazer, "Sense/Memory/Sense-Memory: Reading Narratives of Shakespearian Rehearsals," *Shakespeare Survey* 62 (2009): 328–48, quotation at 334.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Abdulhamit Arvas is assistant professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. His work on early modern sexualities, genders, race, cross-cultural encounters, and sexual politics in modern Turkey has appeared in journals including *English Literary Renaissance*, *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies*, *Shakespeare Survey*, and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, and in edited collections such as *The Postcolonial World*, *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, *England's Asian Renaissance*, and *A Companion to Global Shakespeares*. He has co-edited the tenth-anniversary issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*. His book project explores English and Ottoman sexualities with a focus on abductions of beautiful boys in the Mediterranean during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Roland Betancourt is professor of art history and Chancellor's Fellow at the University of California, Irvine. They are the author of *Sight, Touch, and Imagination in Byzantium* (2018), *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (2020), and *Performing the Gospels in Byzantium: Sight, Sound, and Space in the Divine Liturgy* (2021). Betancourt's ongoing work looks at issues of temporality and simulacral spaces across the medieval and modern worlds, considering how ideas of technology, sexuality, and historical referentiality intersect.

M. W. Bychowski is full-time English faculty at Case Western Reserve University. She received her PhD in English literature from the George Washington University. As the Anisfield-Wolf SAGES Fellow, Bychowski teaches courses on diversity and social justice, including seminars on transgender literature, queer Christianity, women of the civil rights movement, disability studies, and intersectional traditions of feminism. Her scholarship appears in *TSQ* ("Trans*Historicities" and "On Genesis"), *postmedieval* ("Trans Textuality" and "The Isle of Hermaphrodites"), *Accessus* ("Unconfessing Transgender"), the *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, and the *Ashgate Research Companion to Medieval Disability Studies*. Together with Dorothy Kim, she edited the "Medieval Trans Feminism" special issue collection for *Medieval Feminist Forum*, for which she contributed a piece on medieval transgender suicide ("The Necropolitics of

CONTRIBUTORS

Narcissus”) and co-wrote the introduction. Additionally, she maintains Transliterature Online (www.ThingsTransform.com), a center for digital scholarship on transgender and disability studies, medieval and post-medieval.

Emma Campbell is associate professor/reader in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Warwick University. She has published on a broad range of medieval French texts prior to the fourteenth century, including major traditions such as saints’ lives and bestiaries. She is particularly interested in theoretically oriented approaches to medieval literature and manuscript studies, notably in relation to feminism and queer theory, anthropology, postcolonial theory, and translation studies. She is the author of *Medieval Saints’ Lives: The Gift, Kinship and Community in Old French Hagiography* and co-editor of *Rethinking Medieval Translation: Ethics, Politics, Theory* and of *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*.

Igor H. De Souza is a lecturer in gender studies and in Spanish and Portuguese at Yale University. He is also an Associate Research Fellow in Judaic studies at Yale. He received his PhD in Jewish studies from the University of Chicago, and he was the Flegg Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Jewish Studies at McGill University in Montreal. De Souza teaches seminars in the history of sexuality and in intellectual history. They include “Race, Religion, and Sex in the Inquisition,” “Sexual Minorities from Plato to the Enlightenment,” and “Persecution and Deviance in the West.” He is currently preparing a seminar on Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. He has published research on medieval Jewish thought, including a book, *Rewriting Maimonides*, as well as essays in edited volumes. His work in progress is a book on the history of sodomy in Jewish tradition.

Leah DeVun is an associate professor of history at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* (2009) and *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (2021). She is co-editor (with Zeb Tortorici) of “Trans*Historicities,” a special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. She has also published articles in *GLQ*, *Radical History Review*, *Osiris*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, and *postmedieval*.

Micah James Goodrich earned his PhD in the English Department, Medieval Studies Program, at the University of Connecticut. He works on Middle English literature, the literary history of gender, sexuality, and embodiment, transgender studies, disability studies, and queer/trans ecologies. Goodrich

has published on animacy and species division in *Early Middle English*, and on chrononormative salvation and queer labor in the *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, and he has a forthcoming essay in *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies*. Alongside Mary Rambaran-Olm and M. Breann Leake, Micah has been co-editing a special tenth-anniversary issue of *postmedieval* on race and revolution in medieval studies.

Alexa Alice Joubin is professor of English, women's, gender, and sexuality studies, theater, international affairs, and East Asian languages and cultures at George Washington University in Washington, DC, where she is founding co-director of the Digital Humanities Institute. At MIT she is co-founder and co-director of the open access Global Shakespeares digital performance archive (<https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/>). Her latest books include *Shakespeare and East Asia* (2021), *Race* (with Martin Orkin), *Local and Global Myths in Shakespearean Performance* (co-editor, 2018), and *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (co-editor, 2014). She is co-general editor of *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* and editor of the Global Shakespeares series published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Anna M. Kłosowska is professor of French literature at Miami University. Her recent publications include *Disturbing Times: Medieval Pasts, Reimagined Futures*, co-edited with Catherine Karkov and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (2020). She is the author of *Queer Love in the Middle Ages* (2005). She edited and translated Madeleine de l'Aubepine's *Selected Poems* (2007) and has published forty articles and six co-edited journal issues or collections. Her current book-in-progress, *Remarkable Objects: Silk, Metal, Ceramics, Paper, Ivory*, examines medieval France in the light of five exceptional objects from Nishapur, Damascus, North Africa, and Al-Andalus.

Greta LaFleur is an associate professor of American studies at Yale University. She is the author of *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (2018) and the co-editor (with Kyla Schuller) of "The Origins of Biopolitics in the Americas," a 2019 special issue of *American Quarterly*, and the forthcoming "The Science of Sex 'Itself'" (co-edited with Benjamin Kahan), a special issue of *GLQ*. Her writing has also appeared in *Early American Studies*, *Early American Literature*, *American Literature*, *Criticism*, and the *New Republic*, and on *Public Books* and *BLARB: The Blog of the Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Scott Larson is a Lecturer IV in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is a scholar of transgender history

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"Trans Historical raises important **historicist and metahistorical** questions about how sexuality and gender have been **variable and contingent across cultures**, revealing and denaturalizing cis-normative assumptions about the past."

—**SUSAN STRYKER**, author of *Transgender History*

"Trans Historical provides a powerful **rejoinder to the common view** that there were no transgender people in premodern history. This volume will be **indispensable** for historians of gender and sexuality, as well as trans scholars who study the present moment."

—**RUTH EVANS**, editor of *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages*

Trans Historical explores the plurality of gender experiences that flourished before the modern era, from late antiquity to the eighteenth century, across a broad geographic range, from Spain to Poland and Byzantium to Boston. Refuting arguments that transgender people, experiences, and identities were nonexistent or even impossible prior to the twentieth century, this volume focuses on archives—literary texts, trial transcripts, documents, and artifacts—that denaturalize gender as a category. The essays historicize the many different social lives of sexual differentiation, exploring what gender might have been before modern medicine, the anatomical sciences, and the sedimentation of gender difference into its putatively binary form.

The volume's multidisciplinary group of contributors considers how individuals, communities, and states understood and enacted gender as a social experience distinct from the assignment of sex at birth. Alongside historical questions about the meaning of sexual differentiation, *Trans Historical* offers a series of diverse meditations on how scholars who study the medieval and early modern periods might approach gender nonconformity before the nineteenth-century emergence of "the norm" and "the normal."

CONTRIBUTORS: Abdulhamit Arvas, University of Pennsylvania; Roland Betancourt, University of California, Irvine; M. W. Bychowski, Case Western Reserve University; Emma Campbell, Warwick University; Igor H. De Souza, Yale University; Leah DeVun, Rutgers University; Micah James Goodrich, University of Connecticut; Alexa Alice Joubin, George Washington University; Anna Kłosowska; Greta LaFleur; Scott Larson, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Kathleen Perry Long, Cornell University; Robert Mills, University College London; Masha Raskolnikov; Zrinka Stahuljak, UCLA.

GRETA LAFLEUR is Associate Professor of American Studies at Yale University and author of *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America*.

MASHA RASKOLNIKOV is Associate Professor of English at Cornell University and author of *Body Against Soul*.

ANNA KŁOSOWSKA is Professor of French at Miami University and a coeditor of *Disturbing Times*.

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