



SHAKESPEAREAN PERFORMANCE
THROUGH A TRANS LENS

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Abstract

Gender is a set of interpersonal relationships and social practices that evolve in the presence of other people, in social spaces, and over time. My theory of trans lens corrects the institutionalized cis-sexism that assumes the cis status of even those characters with fluid gender practices. It does so by questioning the purported neutrality of cisgender subject positions. Tracing the development of trans presence in Shakespearean and global performances, this article uses Richard Eyre's film *Stage Beauty* as a case study to demonstrate trans lens at work, to delineate the relationships between transgender, adaptation, queer, and performance studies, and to reveal the caveats of those fields.

About the Author

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There are two types of transgender performance today that portray, respectively, tacit and overt transness. Some of these works feature characters with ambiguous identities that lend themselves to discussions through the lens of trans aesthetics—a theory about acting methods that highlight and sustain practices that are in contravention of social norms. These works may not always be trans-positive or bill themselves as trans-inclusive at all, but they can be interpreted productively through what I call the “trans lens.” Richard Eyre’s *Othello*-inspired film *Stage Beauty* (2004), with a cisgender cast, is an example of tacit performance of transness. Other works interpret genderplay more explicitly as transgender practices or employ trans artists, such as Sebastián Lelio’s Oscar-winning *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), starring Daniela Vega, Chile’s first openly trans actress. Overt representations of transness are typically seen in documentaries (such as the TLC reality television series *I am Jazz*, 2015), works by trans artists, and narratives that are inspired by true events (such as Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry*, 1999). Both types of works deal with the tension between the truth of one’s gender practices and the screening of those practices in performance. It is socially and aesthetically important to create and study works led by trans artists which have testimonial, educational value, but it is equally meaningful to use my trans lens to counter prevailing assumptions by reinterpreting works that have been labeled otherwise.¹ In particular, highlighting tacit transness is an important step to decolonize testimonial transness which has been instrumentalized for the benefit of cisgender communities in the form of “inspiration porn” (Young). My trans lens enables us to understand how performances construct gender practices.

Representations of transness raise new questions about the sociality of gender practices, namely the social processes that enrich or hinder gender practices in various communities. In an early scene in *Stage Beauty*, the seventeenth-century star Edward (Ned) Kynaston (played by Billy Crudup) has given another evening performance of Othello’s wife, Desdemona, earning a standing ovation. While the Moorish general and his ensign Iago take center stage in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Kynaston’s fragile, white Desdemona is the real draw in this cinematic recreation of Restoration-era theater in London. After the show, Kynaston, still not quite satisfied with his well-received performance, asks his dresser Maria Hughes (Claire Danes) to help him perfect his death scene: “You be Othello, and I’ll be me.” Kynaston notably does not see himself as Desdemona, a transient stage role, but simply as himself even offstage, a woman who “dies beautifully” as he muses.² Later, after the audience clears the auditorium, Kynaston removes his bodice and dress, then proceeds to the empty stage—shirtless, candle in hand—to rehearse affectionate feminine gestures. Surprising him in the onstage bed behind him is a shirtless man, the Duke of Buckingham (played by Ben Chaplin), who calls out, “M’lady!” In this dimly lit room with a dark blue tint, the duke kisses Kynaston before pulling out a blond wig. “Put this on, will you?” he cajoles, elaborating with a double entendre: “I like to see a golden flow as I die in you.” Displeased, Kynaston asks: “Would you ask your lady whores to wear a wig to bed?” The duke replies, glibly: “If it makes them more of a woman!”

1 Some practitioners and scholars believe that the overuse of trans testimony for educational purposes can silo trans voices by making them seem more manageable and self-contained from the perspective of theatre producers (Hann 2022).

2 I follow the choice of personal pronouns by the character Kynaston who, throughout the film, plays many parts on- and offstage.

The duke confides, in another scene, to having looked through, rather than at, Kynaston. Even though he has “always thought of [Kynaston] as a woman” in foreplay, he is primarily attracted to genderplay, to Kynaston’s performance of Shakespeare’s female characters who die: “I’d think, here I am . . . inside Desdemona, Cleopatra, poor Ophelia.” The duke sees Kynaston as someone who fulfills his sexual fantasy, which the latter rejects. Kynaston’s expression of femininity is not defined by such gender accessories as bodices and wigs, but by his self-image, as he states: “I’ve never slept with a woman . . . except myself.”³

These scenes invite fluid interpretations of how one’s body relates to one’s social role. Kynaston, billed by the film as “the last of his kind,” is a Restoration-era adult “boy actor” who achieves fame by playing Shakespeare’s female characters such as Ophelia and Desdemona. Offstage, he presents as what is now known as “trans feminine,” or socially feminine practices conducted by trans and nonbinary people who identify with femininity; that identification can, but does not always, change with social contexts. In the first half of the film, Kynaston presents as female in his romantic life offstage. Towards the end of the film, Kynaston begins to identify as we might now call “cis” which refers to people whose gender practice happens to be congruent with the gender given to them by their society. However, the film offers only partial truths to audiences in its fictionalization of trans life.

The metatheatrical film *Stage Beauty* adapts *Othello* and the historical Kynaston’s gendered experience to comment on modern imaginations of seventeenth-century social practices. Historically the gender practices of Kynaston and his characters had been regarded as more fluid. For example, renowned diarist Samuel Pepys uses both masculine and feminine pronouns and nouns, in the same breath, to describe Kynaston’s voice and stage presence on August 18, 1660: “One Kynaston, a boy, . . . made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life—only her voice not very good” (224). We shall return later to Kynaston’s journey through Shakespeare and conflicting gender roles on- and offstage.

In what follows, I will begin with a working definition of my trans lens. This is followed by sections that delineate the relationships between transgender, adaptation, queer, and performance studies. Each section offers a case study, based on *Stage Beauty*, to demonstrate trans lens at work through Shakespearean adaptation and the caveats of those fields. Tracing the development of trans presence in Shakespearean and global performances, this article is intended to be read in tandem with my introduction to this special issue, “Trans as Method: The Sociality of Gender and Shakespeare.”

3 The word accessory may evoke the problematic idea of frivolous lifestyle choices or props in performance, such as “accessories of dress like codpieces and handkerchiefs” (Fisher 10), but I use it here to refer to essential tools in trans practices that aid in self-expression but do not become the only meaningful characteristic of the individual.

Trans Lens: A Working Definition

As my introduction to this issue suggests, my trans lens regards gender as a set of evolving interpersonal relationships and social practices rather than immutable, fixed gender identities. When actors embody a role in scripted representations of dramatic situations, their own gendered bodies — with their perceived or self-claimed identities — enrich the meanings of the performance. As I argued in the introduction, gender as a concept is never neutral or value free, and should not be treated as such. A trans lens recognizes that interpersonal relationships and gendered practices evolve in the presence of other people and in different social contexts.

My trans lens, as a perspectival tool, resolves the effect of anamorphosis that creates the false idea of trans “abnormality.” A technique in visual arts, anamorphosis produces a distorted image when seen from the usual viewpoint. When viewed from a particular angle, the distortion disappears. Renowned examples of anamorphosis include those from Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks and *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1533 (National Gallery, London). Holbein’s oil painting memorializes the French ambassadors to England, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. The two men stand to the left and right of a shelf filled with scientific instruments. Between them, towards their feet, is an elongated, bony shape which, when viewed from a high angle on the right, becomes a distorted skull. Another, somewhat twisted, skull appears on the medallion on Jean de Dinteville’s hat.⁴ To frame my trans lens as anamorphic enables us to unlearn our habits of perception and learn to look differently. Commenting on *The Ambassadors*, Jacques Lacan characterizes the gallery viewers’ belated revelation as truth that surfaces in a liminal moment: the anamorphic skull “emerges when, having passed in front of the painting, . . . one turns around to look at it” (173) from the door, from a new angle.

In his application of Lacan’s theory to reading medieval texts, Blake Gutt points out that “what one sees indicates how one sees” in an economy of the gaze (177). In a similar vein, my trans lens changes both what and how we see gender practices. It reveals that the anamorphic image of transness is the product of a particular and fixed vantage point. As such, this lens shifts the burden of explaining difference from the trans subject to the viewer. It is the viewer’s perspective that is inappropriate, not the subject’s existence. This lens could correct numerous biases, including the one in our judicial system that renders victims’ accounts of sexual violence suspect (Brodsky 2021).

This shift is in line with recent developments in queer scholarship to move away from the dichotomized views of normativity that pitch queerness against ever-changing social norms (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). In trans studies, the idea of “transnormativity” has also been critiqued as a structure that sorts trans narratives “into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon medical standards” (Johnson 2016,

⁴ The national Gallery of London now provides the precise viewing position to reveal the anamorphic skull: “1,040 mm from the bottom” and “790 mm to the right” of the painting (Smith, 163).

466–67). This scheme highlights, promotes, and rewards the types of transness deemed “authentic” by gatekeepers. One example of transnormativity is Harry Benjamin’s 1966 categorization of “pseudo” versus “true tranvestites” (16–17) discussed in my Introduction.

A trans-inclusive perspective enhances our understanding of Shakespeare’s comedies and romance plays, as well as characters who go through various forms of transformation, such as Viola (as pageboy Cesario for most of the dramatic action in *Twelfth Night*), Falstaff (as the Witch of Brainford to escape Ford’s house in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), Rosalind venturing into the woods as Ganymede in *As You Like It* (note that Celia, Phoebe, and Audrey were also played by boy actors in Shakespeare’s time), and Imogen (as the boy Fidele in *Cymbeline*). These characters have transformative experiences, move between demarcated social spaces, or break free of social impositions. A trans lens puts into focus how these characters pass through, reside in, or reconstruct “transitive” social spaces. As a result of this destabilization of the concept of gender, such roles are inherently nonbinary and can be played by trans actors.

My trans lens renders legible some of the obscured aspects of these characters, debunks the myth that transgender identity is an exclusively modern phenomenon,⁵ and helps us parse the illegibility and challenge the perceived monstrosity of the gender nonconforming body. Bringing trans studies to Shakespeare studies can also help “revise our thinking about familiar . . . characters, to recognize trans and nonbinary historical figures, and to change our approaches to . . . performing early modern drama” (Chess, Gordon, and Fischer 2019, 13). Indeed, despite the gender fluidity in Shakespearean texts, many productions and films, such as *Stage Beauty* and the cross-gender staging of *Othello* within that film, have been received in a way that centers normative experiences (heteronormative and/or homonormative) at the expense of trans individuals (McFarlane 2011; Kidnie 2011; Scott 2004). My trans lens corrects the institutionalized cis-sexism that assumes the cis status of even those characters with fluid gender practices.

One of my goals is to examine the purported neutrality of cisgender subject positions. This can be accomplished without diagnosing—which is itself another form of imposition—characters as trans per se, but rather analyze the transitive social space and characters’ resistance or willingness to inhabit that space. The notion of transness serves disempowered communities rather than services compulsory normativity because it acknowledges the space inhabited by atypical bodies while avoiding replicating cis institutions’ tendency to mis-categorize and “shock” trans people into existence “through exposure” (Gill-Peterson 2019).

My trans lens also deals with the question of temporality in two senses: 1. elucidation of gender practices that change over time and 2. interrogation of knowledge about the present and the past. Inspired by Jack Halberstam’s call for “perverse presentism,” a methodology that uses historical variations of a concept to

⁵ Emerging new works are expanding our understanding of historical trans practices, such as Mesch 2020 and LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Klosowska 2021.

denaturalize contemporary articulations of that concept (1988, 53), I use my trans lens to capture a wider range of gendered experiences that defy categorization, including both “binary” trans identities, such as Jennifer Finney Boylan’s memoir in which she writes that “I’ve identified as female since I was a child” (130), and tacit transness that does not involve unidirectional, transitory movements, such as Michael Hernandez’s self-portrait entitled “I am neither man nor woman. I just am” (76) or Virginia Woolf’s Shakespeare-inspired novel *Orlando* (2006) in which the immortal protagonist lives through male and female embodiments over four centuries. When Orlando meets the sailor Shelmerdine in the nineteenth century, the two fall in love with each other’s masculine and feminine features and qualities. They become married and continue to playfully question each other’s gender.⁶ As the *Trans Casting Statement* acknowledges, “not all nonbinary and gender nonconforming people identify as trans” (Milk Presents, Outbox, and the Queer House, 2021). It’s important to add that, conversely, not all individuals—whom the society or gatekeepers identify as “trans”—embrace that label; not all of them are gender fluid. Gender is a social position asserted by individuals and by the society at large. Recognizing the fluid nature of gender practices creates a space both for those who traverse the gender spectrum and for those who settle in a more traditionally binary space. The trans lens enables us to use a more inclusive vocabulary to examine a range of aesthetic representations of cross-gender practices in Shakespeare’s works and their adaptations.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam cautions against looking only for historical evidence deemed resonant with our contemporary paradigms, seeking “only to find what [we] think [we] already know” (54). Likewise, Valerie Rohy speaks of a “reparative impulse of making up lost time” in her assessment of how the queer past was overdetermined (2006, 65). Serving to reinforce the critics’ own beliefs, this form of presentism becomes especially problematic in queer studies. Drawing on examples from the early nineteenth century, Halberstam demonstrates that previous scholarship—aiming to give lesbianism a longer history—has misconstrued that history by eliding certain forms of gender variance. As a result, such scholarship ends up contributing to contemporary feminism’s rejection of female masculinity as politically regressive. Halberstam proposes the more historically nuanced method of “perverse presentism” as a solution to this problem. The methodology makes visible some practices that were made obscure within the category of lesbianism, such as female expressions of masculinity—previously categorized under forms of “inversion” of gender expressions. In Halberstam’s study, female masculinity is expressed by women who felt at odds with their bodies and who “changed sex by masquerading as men” (87) before medical transition became possible.

Likewise, while the eighteenth-century figures and characters analyzed by Jen Manion in *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (2020) may not have identified as trans per se or seen themselves as lesbians as our modern culture understands it, their experiences can become more comprehensible to us if we take a trans-inclusive perspective. It is necessary, rather than ahistorical, to excavate historical transgender fig-

⁶ Some scholars interpret *Orlando* as trans fiction (Craps; Crawford), while others disagree on account of Orlando’s gender transition through fantastic, rather than realistic, means (Prosser 168).

ures by naming, rather than glossing over, the set of social practices within and adjacent to contemporary transgender practices in our own fractious time when the very idea of gender is under attack (Butler 2021).

In other words, perverse presentism questions what we think we know about the present time and problematizes the questions we ask about history. One may wonder if it is anachronistic to use such modern concepts as trans to analyze materials from a time before the term existed. First, lives under different labels do not invalidate or negate those trans-adjacent experiences. They may have been visible to people living in that time within their vocabulary, and now rendered invisible due to our compulsion to only look for what we think we already know. Further, the assumption that trans life did not exist in premodern times inherits, and participates in, the purging of trans identities “from the historical record through screeds of invective” (Betancourt 2021, 299). As Roland Betancourt argues, *not* using intersectional, or open-ended, modes of inquiry to examine premodern history risks collapsing modern ideas of gender onto historical ones, which creates anachronistic conjectures (2020). The fact that the early moderns did not generally use the word race to describe differences does not preclude racialized thinking in that time. Conversely, the fact that we no longer have “slave” as a category of social identity does not mean people are not enslaved by socioeconomic conditions.

Focusing on the liminal paths to gender expressions, my trans lens takes a more open-ended, inclusive vantage point to look back in history. It is a useful tool to analyze characters who do not explicitly state their identification using a vocabulary familiar to us, and characters who are both agents and objects of their transformations. As a result, it liberates Shakespeare studies from assumptions about early modern categories of difference, expands the archive for teaching, and promotes a better understanding of a wider range of gender identities.

There is one caveat. Trans visibility is not always empowering or desirable.⁷ Despite its focus on value neutral observation of social practices, the trans lens can, if misappropriated, lead to visibility of trans actors and characters in a way that endangers their access to and inclusion in normativity. Some individuals do need the stability afforded by binary gender practices that align with predominant notions of normativity. The stability enables greater access to resources. The sense of safety is very valuable. In these cases, increased visibility can be harmful. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind presents as Ganymede by drawing on the cis-male identity. Binary identities protect Ganymede and his cousin Celia when traveling through the woods. The play depicts precarious moments when individuals are “clocked” (or outed) as trans. One of the close calls is when Ganymede faints at the sight of a blood-stained napkin, presumably evidence of Orlando’s demise at the mouth of a lioness. Celia models best practices by avoiding to misgender or deadname Ganymede in this moment of crisis, and Oliver, who is the messenger, glosses over Ganymede’s fainting

⁷ Trans visibility remains important to some people in the community, as evidenced by the International Transgender Day of Visibility (March 21) created by Rachel Crandall-Crocker in 2009; it was meant to counterbalance the more somber Transgender Day of Remembrance which honors transgender homicide victims.

by stating that “many will swoon when they do look on blood” before suggesting that Ganymede lacks “a man’s heart.” Observation of social practices through the trans lens can be liberating for one group of individuals while causing distress to another, in that the lens can become a scopophilic surveillance tool.

Adapting Gendered Narratives

There is affinity between adaptation studies and transgender studies, because both reject the notion of purity and both are translational practices. As Petrus Liu points out, gender as a concept is inherently translational “between contexts or languages” and “intertwined with the . . . violences of imperialism . . . and transnational capitalism” (342). Similarly, adaptations “translate” narratives into new forms of artistic expression. Both fields investigate the transformations of artistic and embodied experiences. Both fields examine texts and genders as forms of intertextual and interpersonal relationships that evolve over time.

In his study of film adaptations, Thomas Leitch emphasizes the intellectual benefits of constantly rewriting cultural texts as a process to rediscover ourselves. Adaptations are works-in-progress and “institutional practices of rewriting” (303). All texts, canonical or otherwise, are malleable and mobile. Shakespeare adaptation studies, a field that was once plagued by the myth of a static text, has also moved on from the fidelity discourse—evaluative discussions of how “faithful” an adaptation is to what Shakespeare supposedly wrote—to “investigate adaptations as works with inherent value and meaning, not merely as derivative works.” These works transcend the binary notions of the “original” and the “derivative” by speaking to one another “rather than turning always back” to some imaginary point of origin (Iyengar and Jacobson 2020, 2–3). Current adaptation studies challenge “fixed notions of cultural authenticity” by forming rhizomatic, web-like, intraregional networks of cultural exchange which circumvent perceived points of cultural origin for specific texts. Adaptation studies take to task the “singularity” of traditionally canonical authors such as Shakespeare (Joubin 2021, 294). We gain a new worldview as the dots of literary culture are reconnected in a more agile network and as the circuits of culture are rewired to reflect the time we live in.

As the foregoing section shows, trans studies offers parallel tools to accomplish the same task to denaturalize “originary” concepts in the field of gender studies. Over the past decade, trans studies has broken down not only notions of prescriptive normativity in body image and social behaviors, but also traditional hierarchies of binary genders, or the supposedly “natural” and typical male and female bodies. The hierarchies, as we have seen, are not natural but merely naturalized by cisgender history.

Additionally, adaptations empower trans artists to make important revisions to canonized gendered narratives. Emma Frankland and Andy Kesson, for instance, are collaborating on a production of John Lyly’s 1588 comedy *Galatea* as a trans narrative, to be staged in the future, as was mentioned during Frankland’s workshop “Towards a Trans Canon” at Stratford Festival’s 2019 Theatre Laboratory. To escape their fate of being sacrificed as the “fairest virgins” to Agar, Galatea and Phillida, on parallel trajectories, end up

being dressed up by their fathers as boys and sent into the forest where the two fall in love. Since Galatea and Phillida spend a good deal of time “exploring how clothing, gesture, the way you hold your body . . . all offer different ways for your gender to present and to be read” (Frankland and Kesson 2019, 288), the storyline provides a foundation for transgender interpretation. Aiming to create “stories that can provide more nuanced and equitable ways of seeing the world,” Frankland envisions Galatea and Phillida as characters who “find freedom in each other as nonbinary or genderqueer individuals” (288, 292). In 2021, Rachel Chung directed a trans-inclusive production of *Gallathea* on YouTube for The Show Must Go On which starred Shakira Searle (they / them) as Gallathea and Eugenia Low (she / her) as Phillida. Anita Raychawdhuri notes the queer vibe in the final scene that does not stage Venus’ promised transformation of one of the lovers into a boy. The unknowability (it is unclear which character will be transformed) and undecidability (“what it means to change in this context”) challenge the audiences’ habitual insistence on “hav[ing] things explained or displayed” (145). The production accomplished its goal of bringing pleasure to its audiences without being didactic when, despite acknowledging her “allosexual bias” which prevents her from “previously thinking about an asexual analysis” of *Gallathea* (145), Raychawdhuri shares “the gender euphoria . . . of the entire cast” (147).

Since it captures narrative complexity, trans as method celebrates this type of uncertainty and open-ended narratives, enabling individuals to be more open to suggestions and be less judgmental. Adaptations amplify narrative complexity by giving language to minoritized communities to speak through versions of a text that has already circulated widely. Adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid* are a constant point of reference among young trans girls in mainstream media, with a focus on the transformation of body rather than the tragic ending of the story itself. Ariel the mermaid “wants to perform the human identity that feels natural for her” which “others do not recognize as natural.” Some trans individuals find themselves represented in the story about Ariel who undergoes “painful changes to her body” to live authentically (Spencer 2014, 116–17). Likewise, Shakespeare’s plays provide material that gives rise to this type of reparative trans performance, such as Carlyle Stewart’s film *As You Like It* (2019), shot in Death Valley, with an all-male cast.

To demonstrate both the affinity between adaptation and trans studies and the productive combination of the two, let us look at *Stage Beauty* through the trans lens. While the motifs of *Othello* are an important framing device in the film, the film is not in itself a retelling of Shakespeare’s tragedy. However, its actor-characters take artistic license in adapting aspects of Shakespeare to express or suppress their desires and identities. When Kynaston is still playing female roles, especially Desdemona, multiple scenes offer close-up shots of him applying facial makeup and fitting his wig. The camera follows the actor-character to his dressing room to witness him “shed[ding] my skin,” as he puts it. Even after removing his wig, he continues to use practiced, dainty 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 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 a socially assigned gender identity.

Initially presenting as female on- and offstage, Kynaston inhabits white womanhood by dying repeatedly, and "beautifully" as he proudly asserts. After one evening's performance of Desdemona, Kynaston returns to Desdemona's deathbed to reenact, in a non-theatrical setting, feminine submission in his love life, much like Desdemona does in his interpretation of the tragedy. The stage bed creates an irony in their relationship. It is notable that both Kynaston and his sexual partner imagine ideal womanhood through deaths of Shakespearean heroines. Indeed, Kynaston takes great pride in his portrayal of the murder of Desdemona ("Women do everything beautifully, especially when they die," he muses, echoing the duke's obsession), making death an integral part of the stage performance of femininity. Like the duke, Kynaston draws on the metaphorical connection between orgasm and death.

In his stage performance of Desdemona, Kynaston converts to art women's death at the hands of dominant men, with which his dresser and later lover Maria Hughes disagrees ("I always hated you as Desdemona. You never fought! You just died beautifully!"). Kynaston's association of death and feminine beauty reflects the historical stereotype that the Desdemona is most compelling after her death. The belief eroticizes female bodies and corpses. Both Kynaston and Maria adapt gender roles by playing the character Desdemona at different points, as they both take on that stage role at various points onstage and wear Desdemona's costumes offstage. As much as the role of Desdemona helps Kynaston construct unique gender expressions and helps Maria resist socially imposed gender roles, the film as a whole inadvertently associates the voyeuristic value of dying—whether "beautifully" (in Kynaston's words) or authentically as Maria suggests—with fragile, white femininity.

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 self-worth. The royal decree outlaws Kynaston's intricately stylized representation of women. Without his female stage roles that have come to define who he is, Kynaston is at a loss. His lover, obsessed with Kynaston's performance of feminine subjugation by dramatizing the deaths of Desdemona, Cleopatra, and Ophelia, does not accept him because he is "none of them now." The duke adds that "I don't know who you are. I doubt you do. I don't want you! What you are now." The duke suggests that without his female dramatic roles, Kynaston cannot exist as a nonbinary person. Kynaston's agony and trepidation when his livelihood is threatened stands in stark contrast to his later role as a confident heterosexual man onstage and in private life. After breaking up with the duke, Kynaston begins playing Othello in blackface—following the practice of the time—and embarks on a more aggressive "therapeutic" arc.

Just as Kynaston previously adapts the role of Desdemona to create ideal white womanhood, he "becomes a man" by inhabiting Othello's racialized masculinity and by killing a woman onstage. Now playing Oth-

ello to Maria's Desdemona, Kynaston has deployed shifting social practices of race, gender, and sexuality to fashion a series of self-images in each stage of his career and private life. Kynaston's performance of Black masculinity, therefore, shows that racialized identities are profoundly constituted by exclusionary gendered narratives (Joubin and Orkin, 202–9), though the final scene of the film teases playfully with gender fluidity. As part of their foreplay in an intimate scene, Maria asks Kynaston "so what are you now?" Here Maria is referring to the masculine and feminine characters Kynaston has played in his career as well as various guises he has taken on while role-playing with Maria in bed. With a wink, Kynaston shrugs and says "I don't know." Perhaps the point is that the pursuit of binary identities is a futile exercise since gender practices evolve contextually and over time.

The scenes of Kynaston's transition from what some characters see as "deviant" to conformist roles show how the bodies and stage space he inhabits are transitive. Seen through the trans lens, Kynaston's blackface Othello is "transitive," because the efficacy of his performance of violent, racialized masculinity depends upon the projected vulnerability of white femininity, first popularized by Kynaston and now embodied by Maria. Since race and gender are co-constitutive (Joubin and Orkin 2019, 39–41), the practice of masculinizing blackface is transitive and transformative. In the end, Kynaston's appropriations of racial and gender roles expand existing social structures for discussing these topics.

Queer Studies, Cis-sexism, and the Trans Lens

Beyond adaptation studies, trans studies shares close, but contested, relationships with several other fields, especially queer and feminist studies, which is why Kynaston, in the case study above, has received in-depth interpretations through feminist and queer theories. Kynaston does not explicitly state his gender identification, and the character is played by a cis actor. As such, Kynaston's ambiguity embodies the relationship between queer and trans studies.

First-wave and second-wave feminists, led by cisgender theorists, worked to deconstruct traditional, biologically based gender roles, breaking down the boundaries of what defines a "normal" woman (Friedan 1963). Meanwhile, queer studies, led by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler in the 1990s, focus on a set of slightly different but related issues of normativity. Inspired by Michel Foucault's and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction—a critique of the idea of "essence" of text and identities—queer theory deconstructs unspoken assumptions about sexual orientations, in particular the tendency to assume all individuals are heterosexual, a phenomenon known as heteronormativity or "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 2003). Normative social behaviors, according to queer theory, are predicated upon heterosexual desires. Deviance from such norms would be penalized. While the mission of "deconstructing normativity in all its guises" has become queer studies' primary value (Traub 2016, 17), some critics have recently begun to challenge the queer default stance of "anti-normativity" (Wiegman and Wilson 2015).

Queer studies' focus on anti-heteronormativity and perpetuation of homonormativity have not been productive for trans studies, because, as Susan Stryker observes, these moves privilege "homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms, and an antipathy . . . toward other modes of queer difference" (2006, 7). Judith Butler echoes this view when adding some nuance to her renowned theory of gender "performativity," asking:

If queer means that we are generally people whose gender and sexuality is unfixed then what room is there in a queer movement for those who understand themselves as requiring – and wanting – a clear gender category within a binary frame? Or what room is there for people who require a gender designation that is more or less unequivocal in order to function well and to be relieved of certain forms of social ostracism? Many people with intersexed conditions want to be categorized within a binary system and do not want to be romanticized as existing beyond all categories (Ahmed 490).

Transfeminism builds upon these core tenets about gender and sexuality to show that trans people face similar gender-based oppression, and to argue that people of all genders should be liberated from the confinement of socially imposed norms, particularly normative gender expressions.⁸ It would seem feminism, queer theory, and trans studies share the same roof. However, there are tensions between trans activists and non-trans feminists, and trans studies is thought of as an "evil" twin of queer studies (Stryker 2004). As Gayle Salomon writes, the trans subjectivity "pose[s] a challenge to fixed taxonomies of gender," such as the category of woman, and therefore meets "resistance in the specificity of women's studies as a discipline whose very essence depends upon the fixedness of gender" (117). Trans studies show, further, that while cis women and Black men routinely face violence, trans people, particularly trans women of color, are subjected to additional forms of gender policing. Feminism and transgender theory have always had a fraught relationship due to cis-sexism that is pervasive in the production of knowledge about gender.

Drawing on theories by trans-identified critics, the trans lens is an important tool to produce scholarship that is more inclusive, because it helps us counteract the assumed cisgender status of characters and decolonize the cis-sexist history. As M. W. Bychowski writes, "the institutional cis-sexism . . . has made it easier for cisgender scholars to claim and maintain . . . academic authority." The cis-sexist bias has led to "compulsory cisgender identity assignment" to all individuals (95–96), which is why reviews and scholarship have assumed cis status of even a character like Kynaston in *Stage Beauty*.

Cis-sexism continues to inform even the scholarship that seeks to deconstruct social norms. Even queer studies privileged cisgender perspectives. For instance, in her assessment of the murder of transgender woman Venus Xtravaganza (1965–1988) in Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), Judith Butler—widely regarded as the definitive voice of gender studies—conflates sexuality and gender

⁸ In Emi Koyama's words, transfeminism liberates trans women as well as "all women and beyond" (2003, 244). Trans rights are human rights.

identity. Butler believes that Venus fails “to pass completely” and dies of “homophobic violence” (1993, 129–30). Butler misgenders the transgender performer even though she presents as a woman. Butler mistakes anti-trans violence for “homophobic” attacks. As Jay Prosser points out, the status of Venus’s anatomy does not make her a homosexual man, and her murder should not have been categorized as a homophobic act (46). Butler’s 1993 assumption is an example of cis-sexism of that time period, and she has since updated her theory to be more trans-inclusive. In a 2015 interview with Cristan Williams, Butler makes amends by rejecting “the characterization of a transwoman as a mutilated man.” She elaborates that her theory of gender performativity has been misrepresented, as she does not see gender as a “choice.” However, she remains suspicious of whether such language as an “innate” gender identity is effective in conveying subjective experiences. Butler is concerned about misuses of the word “innate” in discriminatory descriptions of women or Black people as part of an attempt to “fix a social reality into a natural necessity” (Williams).

These potential challenges of terminology aside, it is clear that no political, medical, or religious authority should interfere with individual autonomy. Emi Koyama has outlined two principles of transfeminism, namely respect—beyond “tolerance”—of individuality, and unhindered individual autonomy (244). The society should respect each individual’s uniqueness, and each individual should possess full control over their own bodily autonomy and well-being. It is important to apply these transfeminist principles to Shakespeare studies in order to evaluate more effectively such works as *Stage Beauty*.

In their widely circulated early 1990s studies, psychologists Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, like Butler in that same period, took a cis-sexist perspective and conflated sexuality with gender expression. Glossing over trans individuals’ sufferings, the Bulloughs argued that trans masculine “cross-dressers” are motivated by gaining independence and freedom, while trans feminine “cross-dressers” wish to access women-only spaces for sexual titillation or “indulge” in homosexual encounters (205–208). The Bulloughs were incapable of taking a trans-positive perspective to understand trans people’s pursuit of a life worth living. They trivialized the need to survive as shallow power play. These cases show that there is a gap between social perceptions of cross-gender roles in drama and of gender nonconformity in real life.

Trans Lens and Performance Theories

The performing arts are an important tool for tackling cis-sexism, given their power of embodied representation, as is the case of Kynaston in the aforementioned *Stage Beauty*. Both cis and trans practices can be performative in this context, which puts dominant and minoritized social groups on equal footing.

However, this special issue’s focus on performance warrants a reminder that there is some risk in bringing performance theories to bear on transgender studies. Detractors often accuse trans people of “performing” to “pass” as someone else to deceive the society and to gain access to the “wrong” restroom. In fact, if trans individuals are performing roles at all, it is either a cis-gender conforming role enforced by the society or

some form of trans narrative deemed acceptable by medical gatekeepers. Trans individuals have to perform in this sense and in these contexts in order to survive or to obtain medical care (Seelman and Poteat 2020). On one hand, the notion of performative gender expressions has been misappropriated by anti-trans groups to invalidate trans life, and, as a result, rejected by some trans activists as harmful to trans self-realization. On the other hand, as articles in this issue show, transgender performances can serve socially reparative purposes through characterization and representation. Reparative performances—in which characters see their conditions improve—offer optimism and model best practices. Moreover, performance illustrates how seemingly contradictory notions can be true at the same time. It destabilizes the idea of singularity and the perceived absolutism of signifiers such as gender.

This section addresses, and offers my trans lens as a solution to, three interconnected problems associated with “gender performativity,” namely popular culture’s misrepresentation of trans life as inauthentic performance, trans theorists’ resistance to this mischaracterization, and the harmful notion of “Oppression Olympics”—a term coined by Elizabeth Martínez to critique performative “competitions among different social groups for the gold medal of Most Oppressed” (5). Trans people and characters are often accused of fabricating an identity to deceive those around them for sinister purposes. Performer and activist Julia Serano, who coins the term transmisogyny (which is the topic of Lisa Starks’s article in this issue), observes that the media often present trans women as either cunning sexual predators or laughable fakes (2007, 36). Serano theorizes that this pattern of representation in fact harms all women, because it promotes the idea that femininity is artificial (44, 340). Accusations of fake identities are also a tactic of social control. As Toby Beauchamp’s study reveals, gender nonconformity only comes to be associated with “fraud” through “demands for disclosure” and through “claims that certain bodies or identities do not match as they ought to” (9).

This double bind of deceiver or fake human is captured by a scene of “genitalia check” in *Stage Beauty*, in which the self-referentiality of drag, an imitation that Jennifer Drouin glosses as “almost but not quite” right (23), draws attention to the artifice of gendered bodies in performance. After Kynaston’s successful performance one evening, two aristocratic female fans invite him—reinstated 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’s a wigmaker. He says you’re much too beautiful to be a gentleman.” “And 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 castrati [*sic*] at birth. Then you become a woman.” Kynaston responds cheerfully and flirtingly. Batting his eyelashes, Kynaston assures them of his possession of a “big, bulging, orb-and-sceptre of a thingy.” He grasps the ladies’ hands and directs them under his skirt, inching towards his groin. The ladies insist: “We’d have to touch it.” We aren’t shown exactly what happens next, but a series of reaction shots show the two gentle-

women 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' visions of the male–female binary.

Another instance of gender practices in performance takes place on a stage bed. Kynaston's illicit encounters with the duke take place onstage following his evening performance. After the audience clears the auditorium, Kynaston leaves the role of Desdemona behind only to voluntarily return to the same bed where he, as Desdemona, has just been murdered. The fact that their trysts take place on an empty stage accentuates the idea that Kynaston puts on a second show each evening, a private show for an audience of one on a public stage—a private act in a public space. The duke desires ideal womanhood through Kynaston's ability to perform feminine submission in his love life. The stage bed creates an irony in their relationship.

The duke's emotional attachment to such gendered accessories as the wig, and the two women's fascination with Kynaston's genitalia, evoke the trope of “gender reveal.” Talia Mae Bettcher argues that the misconception of an anatomical reality of gender casts trans people as “evil . . . make-believers” (2007, 50), locking them into being a visible pretender or an invisible deceiver who must be forcefully exposed at some point. Either way, they are seen as “fundamentally illusory” (2007, 59).

Kynaston pushes back on the idea that the wig alone makes him a woman. In some scenes he has more agency. The carriage scene shows his controlled granting—while humoring with a sense of playfulness—other characters' requests for genital verification. Kynaston takes control in these “gender revelation” scenes. However, 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” (Klett 2008, 169). In particular, films that depict gender nonconformity in theater making foster a dual consciousness in their audiences: the awareness of identities as both manufactured onstage and filtered by cinematic devices—an awareness that Kynaston can both be himself and playing a role.

Kynaston's failure to operate—with the anticipated body parts or with the wig—in the confines of his society creates a fissure. The scene in the carriage, for example, creates what Rachel Hann calls “a category slippage” involving cis expectations of nudity and the subsequent shock when a trans body on display deviates from that expectation onstage or onscreen (2021). Supplanting what Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze—a default position taken by the characters, filmmakers, and audiences (6–18), the trans lens is not scopophilic or voyeuristic in nature. Instead, it shifts the burden of self-explanation away from Kynaston to the viewers who have to reflect on their assumptions. Under this lens, that cognitive fissure is not disruptive but in fact productive. Legacy Russell uses “glitch feminism” to turn such fissures into an empowering element, as “the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest” (22). The one who is glitching is not Kynaston but the film audiences.

The notion of social performance becomes, in works such as *Stage Beauty*, a negating trait of trans life. As a trans character played by a cis-actor, Kynaston reinscribes the sexed body into the social-constructivist

discourse about gender while simultaneously suggesting that anatomy is his destiny. The idea of socially constructed performativity—that gender identities are structured by social consensus and (un)consciously performed by individuals to meet those expectations (Butler 1993)—has the potential to liberate societies from essentialist, biological determinism, but it has also been used in anti-trans rhetoric about the inauthenticity of trans individuals. Queer theorists’ usage of performativity does not help, either. Talia Mae Bettcher critiques some queer theorists’ use of “transsexuality as nothing more than a rhetorical device” to advance their own arguments while glossing over the suffering of the trans characters (2016, 417).

It must be noted that trans individuals should not be expected to shoulder the burden of deconstructing the gender binary. Trans practices should not be instrumentalized to service more dominant communities. Scholarship should serve the marginalized communities. In queer scholarship that uses the notion of performativity, trans individuals are sometimes written over and rendered invisible. As a result, Jay Prosser raises objections to Judith Butler’s use of trans sufferings merely as a metaphor for her theory of gender performativity (Prosser 1998, 45–47). By the same token, it bears reiterating that trans artists should not be assumed to have a natural affinity to the performing arts. Scholars have debunked the myth of “queer sensibility” in the performing arts (Halperin 2014) which is as problematic as the expectation that trans individuals have the responsibility to educate cisgender people.

Performance is empowering to minorities when they are afforded equal treatment. Beyond self-representation, there is the question of social capital: “When someone who isn’t white, or cis, or able-bodied is cast, they are often met with abuse and prejudice” (Craig 2020). The practice of speaking on others’ behalf privileges “cis experiences over and above trans experiences” (Hann 2021). By foregrounding the cis gaze, it further cements the power that already resides in cis people (as gatekeepers and authorized sources of gendered knowledge) from whom trans people must ask permission to even exist.

The capaciousness of the trans lens can correct this binary bias of the cis gaze. It helps us avoid conflating the emancipating performance of gender (“trans liberation,” Hann 2021) with the misconception of trans people’s purportedly “deceptive” performance of gender roles. The bias stems from deep seated anxieties that lead to compulsory diagnostics and pathologizing of newly visible forms of human experience, but the trans lens seeks to understand rather than diagnose and categorize these experiences.

Some trans theorists, such as Robin Craig, and trans activists support this view that performance is an authentic form of embodiment (2017, 6–7). Emma Frankland, cofounder of the Trans Performance Exchange, sells, on Etsy, T-shirts designed to reclaim an anti-trans statement made by Germaine Greer. Performative merchandising becomes a tool to reframe the issue, to claim the right to talk back, and to turn harmful hate speech on its head. Proceeds from the sale support a fundraiser for gender affirmation surgery, similar to how pejorative phrases such as “nasty woman” and “nevertheless, she persisted,” hurled against US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and US senator Elizabeth Warren, respectively, have

been monetized in apparel, turned into rallying calls, and adopted as rally cries by feminist movements. Their creative practices enable artists to resist and deconstruct dominant ideologies. These are instances of what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification,” “a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse” (19).

Performance in general can also peel back layers of assumption about sartorial and social meanings of gender. For example, while activists have good reasons to believe that sexualized depictions of women are detrimental to the society, there are specific cases where self-performance empowers women. These depictions, by third parties, are indeed demeaning, but some women have taken control of the narrative and turned the table. In her study of the sexualization of Asian/American women, Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that female “productive perversity” (1–29) allows women of color to lay claim to their own sexuality and desires as performers. A more nuanced approach to self-performance can affect public perception of gender practices.

Last, but not least, we will address the toxic concept of hierarchical valuation of authenticity. The concept links authenticity to the degrees of suffering. One anti-trans narrative in our times, driven by TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) ideologies, argues that trans women are not women because they were not raised as women or that their bodies—even after treatment—are not worthy to be considered feminine. The detractors maintain that not having been socialized as women and not having been “oppressed enough” disqualify trans women as women. It seems that the more oppressed a group is, the more “authentic” they are. Elizabeth Martínez uses the term “Oppression Olympics” to critique this twisted logic, a “futile hierarchy of suffering” (Davis 1998, x). As Martínez argues in a parallel, critical race studies context, the “competition” is detrimental to all minoritized groups, because it distracts various disenfranchised communities from finding “the linkage between different oppressions” and identifying solutions. In my view, the “Oppression Olympics” can be debunked by performance’s capacity to encourage reflection on the nuanced and layered identities that we all share.

The non-diagnostic trans lens disrupts such performative contests among different oppressed groups by capturing and analyzing a wide range of gendered experiences. The urge to occupy the most authentically abject position among some self-appointed spokespersons for womanhood undoes the work of generations of feminists by pigeonholing all women in their socially imposed, biologically predetermined “natural” roles. Further, anti-trans discourses parallel in form and logic the early modern ideology of women as inferior beings who are less developed physically and intellectually. The idea that women were not seen as fully adult humans was used as the foundation to legitimate discrimination against women. Ironically, modern-day anti-trans discourses—often constructed in the name of protecting women’s rights—adopt exactly the same patriarchal logic. The heuristic, rather than diagnostic, trans lens attends to transgender performativity without encouraging this type of “Oppression Olympics.”

Conclusion

The function of my trans lens, therefore, is heuristic rather than diagnostic, because it opens up narratives for alternative interpretations. Seeking to understand, rather than diagnose, diverse social practices, the trans lens sustains the indeterminant state of being without pinning down characters' genders or medicalizing their ambiguity. For example, Michelle Terry played the Danish prince to Shubham Saraf's Ophelia at the Globe Theatre in London (*Hamlet*, dir. Federay Holmes and Elle While, 2018). Several roles were cross-cast in this "post-gender" ensemble production. Criticism primarily focused on its place in the long Anglo-European tradition of women playing Hamlet. Commenting on his performance of Ophelia, Saraf said that the non-hierarchical "post-gender" casting was evidence that "we're [now] beyond gender" (qtd in Tripney). Distinct from works in that tradition of "female Hamlet" (Tony Howard 65–97, 137–59), this production takes the cross-gender roles at face value and does not use the gender-bending characters to make statements about the meanings of gender within *Hamlet*. Actors were assigned randomly to characters without consideration of gender identities. Terry's trans masculine Hamlet and Saraf's trans feminine Ophelia can be read with an eye toward the transitive space these characters inhabit. The dramaturgical structures of meanings of these works remain porous and open for both normative and "trans" interpretations.

When we unlearn cis biases, we see non-trans works in a new light. For instance, *Stage Beauty*, a film that does not include trans artists and is not marketed as trans cinema, carries a trans undertone that has been overlooked by the cis gaze. It is important to make casting practices more inclusive, but it is equally important to unlearn taken-for-granted default positions on unfamiliar human experiences.

It should also be noted that performance can become overt or tacit over time. Certain practices and bodies may only index transness in specific contexts. In a future point in time, they may cease to symbolize the practices they do today, or they may begin to signify differently. When it was released in 2004, *Stage Beauty* was at best a tacit representation of transness. Criticism focused on its imagination of historical, cross-gender theater practices and overlooked Kynaston's practices in his private life. The film was regarded as "a darker, bawdier version" of, and sequel to the beloved fictional biopic, *Shakespeare in Love* (Cardullo 2006, 254). Today, in tandem with our twenty-first-century vantage point on trans movements, Kynaston's creation of white womanhood onstage and embodiment of trans femininity offstage invite us to interpret the film as a trans narrative.

Focusing exclusively on works by trans artists runs the risk of further ghettoization and a deepening of the false binaries between "cis" and "trans." My trans lens does not pin down, but rather recognizes, genders as social practices. Jen Manion states in a similar vein that "to say someone 'transed' gender signifies a process . . . without . . . asserting any kind of fixed identity on them." She views literary characters and historical figures "as traveling through life, establishing an ongoing and ever-unfolding relationship with gender,

rather than . . . simply shifting between two unchanging binaries” (11). My trans lens sustains the idea of indeterminacy within the plays and within scholarship without pathologizing the genders of characters who question their assigned social roles or pass through “transitive” social spaces.

Even though, regrettably, *Stage Beauty* and Terry’s *Hamlet* do not involve trans-identified artists,⁹ we can analyze them through my trans lens to de-center the cisgender perspective that has been passed on as a default position. Such works may not label themselves as transgender narratives, but we can use these works to expand our understanding of transitivity—a state of being that defies or remixes purported demarcated social practices.

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⁹ I use “trans-identified” to ensure individual agency and to avoid labeling individuals. The term “trans-identified” signals individuals’ self-identification in publications or public presentations.

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Special Issue

Contemporary Transgender Performance of Shakespeare

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- ◆ proposes “trans” as method and as a social practice
- ◆ argues that the enactment of gender practices is not predicated upon “substitutions”
- ◆ demonstrates trans studies’ relevance to Shakespeare studies
- ◆ highlights practitioners’ voices and amplifies marginalized narratives

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