

The Wonder of Gender: A Note on *As You Like It*

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I

This note is part of my work in progress on connecting gender studies with wonder studies in early modern English culture.¹ The work will appropriate Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical concept of the marvelous presented in his *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Referring to Descartes' philosophical writing in the introduction to his seminal book, Greenblatt writes:

Wonder – thrilling, potentially dangerous, momentarily immobilizing, charged at once with desire, ignorance, and fear – is the quintessential human response to what Descartes calls a 'first encounter'.... Such terms, which recur in philosophy from Aristotle through the seventeenth century, made wonder an almost inevitable component of the discourse of discovery, for by definition wonder is an instinctive recognition of difference, the sign of a heightened attention, 'a sudden surprise of the soul,' as Descartes puts it... in the face of the new. The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood,

¹ Regarding the recent development of the studies in the marvelous, see Joy Kenseth, ed., *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991); Tom B. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); Peter G. Platt, *Reason Diminished: Shakespeare and the Marvelous* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997); Peter G. Platt, ed., *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999).

In connection with my work, R. W. Hepburn's remarks are of great significance. In his essay on wonder, Hepburn writes: "A fuller discussion needs to be linked to two further and not primarily philosophical studies. One is the psychology or the origins of wonder, in early experience and its later transformations. Another is the educator's task--the pedagogics of wonder. How, if one does wish to commend the possible roles of wonder outlined above, can they be furthered and fostered in place of attitudes of cynicism, indifferentism and other rivals?" ("*Wonder*" and *Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighboring Fields*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984, 152).

that can be scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience.²

Regarding the marvelous he writes:

The marvelous is a central feature then in the whole complex system of representation, verbal and visual, philosophical and aesthetic, intellectual and emotional, through which people in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance apprehended, and thence possessed or discarded, the unfamiliar, the alien, the terrible, the desirable and the hateful.³

Having noted Greenblatt's initial perspective, in this section I will explain the reason for my appropriation of his theory, arguing that gender is a source of wonder and discussing the significance of this new approach. In his book of the marvelous, Greenblatt is fundamentally concerned with understanding the dynamic relationship between the self and the other ranging from brutal differentiation (or radical otherization) to non-acknowledged or hidden identification – a variety of disturbing relationships that occur when people of a certain culture encounter those of a different culture. Furthermore, his book leads toward understanding “a discovery of the other in the self” and “a discovery of the self in the other,” which an individual might experience in such an encounter.

Stephen Greenblatt published books on the relationship between the self and the other in early modern English culture as well as in Shakespeare's texts before *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World: Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), and *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990). However, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of*

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 20.

³ Greenblatt 22-23.

the New World is probably the book where Greenblatt presents his theory of the marvelous in the most possible straightforward way. It therefore seems reasonable for me to employ the theory of the marvelous in that book as a frame of reference.

I have to say, however, that although referring to his theory in the field of travel literature, I can neither always follow it alone or any other critical theory and methods, New Historicist or not, nor be constrained by any of them. When I discuss the functions of the wonder of gender in Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic texts, I shall consider other theories of the marvelous in connection with rhetoric and wit, theater, spectacle, and court masques.

While following European traces in the New World, Greenblatt writes: "I have resisted as much as I can the temptation to speak for or about the native cultures" ⁴ Abandoning critical practices to represent the voice(s) of massacred "Indians," he devotes himself to exploring how the "Indians" looked to Europeans such as Columbus and Cortés. Greenblatt's position, which has been criticized by both camps, right and left, could be defended because it clearly reveals a certain intellectual honesty. In his essay on *The Tempest* in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, Greenblatt rather resists once again the temptation to speak for Caliban, who is for the most part treated as a despicable savage or monster by European characters in the play. In my study, however, I would rather let critical practices speak for others, particularly female representations in terms of feminism and gender studies.

I argue that gender, a complex system of difference, is a source of wonder. I will deal with representations of, and discourses on, gender in early modern England, which are closely related to, among others, contemporary discourses on discovery and explorations. I define wonder in my study as follows: Wonder is to recognize difference or the other and to marvel at it. It is a strong response to the other(ness); it can thus be an intense illusionary inward state. Furthermore, it can indicate a force that the other owns to attract the spectator; it can be an extraordinary force that the other owns to make the spectator stand still amazed, confused, or even threatened. From this point of view, the wonder in the

⁴ Greenblatt 7.

discourses on gender could be understood as a compensatory strategy employed to fill the void which opens up when one encounters the radical other and is faced with an epistemological crisis. Incidentally, the other is not always an external entity; one can discover the other within oneself. Besides, when the self (A) and the other (B) are separate, the other's other might be the self (A).

Although gender is a source of wonder, we cannot say that all matters related to gender are wonder(s); there must be difference in intensity of wonder at the very least. In order to make my point clear, I shall give some examples that are likely to cause a sense of intense wonder. We shall wonder intensely when we realize our misrecognition of a cross-dresser's gender. Sexual intercourse, sexuality, androgyny, beauty and ugliness can also be a source of wonder. We could also consider virginity, lasciviousness, madness, body, pregnancy, and non-European women, as a source of wonder, a wonder that is often problematically related to women and femininity.

As mentioned above, my study will appropriate Geenblatt's theory of the marvelous by gender studies for the sake of Shakespeare studies: the provisional title of my study is "Marvelous Appropriations: The Wonder of Gender in Shakespeare's Texts."⁵ I have needs to defend my work.

The discourses on femininity in early modern England and Shakespeare's texts are characterized by contradictions and diversity. These range from the adoration for femininity represented by traditions of the cult of the Virgin Mary and courtly love, which are the remains of medieval traditions or their early modern re-estimations, to misogyny represented by attacks against witches and whores. The representational system of the marvelous serves as a useful frame of reference in order to understand this disturbingly complex situation. If we think that contemporary men found in femininity (or femininities) the unfamiliar, the alien, the terrible, the desirable and the hateful and that they worked to exclude or master—discard or possess—them, we can understand anew their ambivalent attitude toward femininity. The marvelous is also a system of establishing oneself

⁵ I have discussed theoretical issues of gender and the validity of critical appropriations by feminism and gender studies for the sake of Shakespeare studies elsewhere. See "Shakespeare and Gender: Prologue," in *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 57 (Institute of Modern Languages and Cultures, Tsukuba University, forthcoming, 2001) 30-45.

or self-fashioning through differential – often discriminatory – practices of representing others. This system of otherizing the other, or epistemological strategy, also offers an alternative view. Furthermore, although gender in early modern England is evidently a system of difference, we cannot grasp it in its entirety. We cannot wholly explain why and when it was created, what it really was, what each person felt and thought about it, how it really worked within a family, community, or state. For all this indeterminacy, gender difference caused complex and surprising reactions and effects. In order to understand these surprising, sometimes incomprehensible, effects, it is useful to place the system of gender in the very paradoxical framework of the marvelous. In that this includes contradictions and diversity, we might be able to get closer to seeing its “true” picture within such an unfamiliar frame, as if it were an anamorphic painting. This kind of reading strategy will make the binary concept of masculinity and femininity wholly invalid, for we can find femininity in masculinity, and masculinity in femininity. The radical paradox or untenability of gender difference will thus be forcefully disclosed.

I would like to argue that the consideration of gender in early modern England from the perspective of wonder will also lead to insight into today’s gender studies. Another significant aspect of my study is to show a new way of understanding gender by offering a different viewpoint from existing concepts and theories of gender. When we see gender in terms of the representational system of the marvelous, we can see the real difficulty of defining gender from another angle. Provided that gender were absolutely a socio-cultural construction as is often claimed, gender bias could be redressed by policy and education. To our embarrassment and ambitious female students’ disappointment, however, it is hard to redress the bias tellingly despite decades of feminist action and gender studies research. Although gender boundaries might be shifting more than ever today, we can hardly say that a truly radical change or revolution is going to happen anywhere on the globe. When a view of the wonder of gender is introduced, however, we realize that gender has a complex embrace of passion and surprising reactions to the other. If gender is wonder, we can understand why it has ever such a force and charm, neither easily dispossessed nor excluded; why many people of both sexes allow it to remain; and why sexual and class differences in

political power, or for that matter internalization of gender, cannot explain it all. Gender bias should be redressed. If gender is a source of wonder, however, it seems understandable why gender continues to exist. Of course, it is one thing to understand it in this way, while it is absolutely another to approve it.

II

As You Like It is of vital importance since it represents the wonder of gender. Employing the devise of cross-dressing and disguise with masterly art, the play enacts a total confusion of gender (and sexuality) throughout, with the fantastic and homoerotic scenes (3.2, 4.1) in which Rosalind/Ganymede makes Orlando call him Rosalind and woo her/him as a climax in the middle of the play.⁶ The play

⁶ Studies in cross-dressing in early modern Europe; Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (Hampshire: Macmillan P, 1989); Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994). A general reference on cross-dressing: Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992). A much-awaited work of comparative gender studies: Sabrina Petra-Rahmet, ed., *Gender Reversals and Gender Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996).

References on gender and cross-dressing in early modern England and Shakespeare's texts: Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985) 166-90; Leah Marcus, "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny," in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1986) 135-53; Jean Howard, "Crossdressing, the Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988):418-40; Mary E. Weisner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Ann Thompson, "Women/ "women" and the stage," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1500-1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 100-16; Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996); Tracy Sedinger, " "If sight and shape be true": the Epistemology of Cross-Dressing on the London Stage," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 63-79.

Several main references on sexuality and gender in early modern England and Europe: James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986); Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992); James Grantham Turner, ed., *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institution, Texts, Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Jean E. Howard, "The Early Modern and the Homoerotic Turn in Political Criticism," *Shakespeare Studies*, 26 (1998): 105-20.

References on *As You Like It*: Susanne Wofford, "'To You I Give Myself, For I Am Yours': Erotic Performance and Theatrical Performatives in *As You Like It*," in *Shakespeare Reread: The Texts in New Contexts*, ed. Russ McDonald (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 146-69; Penny Gay, *As She Likes It*:

finally and obviously comes to dénouement with “magic” because it is impossible to resolve the confusion by rational means. Furthermore, the play has an Epilogue spoken by Rosalind. The Epilogue is a clever device on one level; it is as good as tells the spectator to enjoy a series of wonderful events in this play and understand them “as you like it.”

It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no epilogue. Yet to good wine they do use good bushes; and good plays prove the better by the help of good epilogue.... My way is to conjure you, and I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you. And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women – as I perceive by your simpering none of you hates them – that between you and the women the play may please. *If I were a woman*, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not. And I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. (5.4.197-217. Italics mine.)⁷

More important, the Epilogue foregrounds the wonder of gender once again on another level. It appears to bring about harmony, creating sexual titillation for an audience of both sexes. After this magical closure, however, it is disclosed that

Shakespeare's Unruly Women (London: Routledge, 1994); Edward Tomarken, ed., “As You Like It” *From 1600 to the Present: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1997) esp. introduction 65-69; Yu Jin Ko, “Shakespeare's Rosalind: Character of Contingency,” in *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts*, ed. Shannon Hengen (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1998) 21-34. The following two books are also of some interest: Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 194-239; Jan Kott, *The Gender of Rosalind: Interpretations, Shakespeare, Büchner, Gautier*, trans. Jadwiga Kosicka and Mark Rosenzweig (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1992), *The Gender of Rosalind* 11-40.

Regarding the subject of wonder in Shakespeare's comedies, see Dolora G. Cunningham, “Wonder and Love in the Romantic Comedies,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 (1984): 626-66.

⁷ The quotation of the play is from *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

the character of Rosalind is played by a boy actor. This is the only play of Shakespeare's to do this. All the audience in a London public theater in early modern England would have known from the start that a boy actor played Rosalind. It is therefore rather exceptional that the boy actor should refer deliberately to his sexual identity. Though it is hilarious and filled with erotic and possibly sodomitical wordplay, the Epilogue does and does not resolve the confusion of gender (and sexuality) in the play. The boy actor later became a source of mystery or puzzlement to later English audiences because the theater put an end to the practice of male transvestism after the Restoration.

In *As You Like It* there are "major" others who produce wonder. Firstly, there is the cross-dressed Rosalind/Ganymede, although the spectator knows her/his sexual identity. (Only Celia and Touchstone among the characters in the play are supposed to know Rosalind's disguise.) Secondly, there comes Hymen, god of marriage, who is supposed to emerge by magic. Thirdly, there is in all probability a boy actor. The play has several female roles, Celia, Phoebe, Audrey, etc. for boy actors, but let us focus on a single boy actor who played Rosalind.

According to a recent study of the boy actor, Lesley Wade Soule's *Actor as Anti-Character: Dionysus, the Devil, and the Boy Rosalind*, he had "charisma," "the uncanny," and "otherness," although we do not know as yet much about him, not even his name. The boy actor is considered to have had a charm that derived from the tradition of devils and fools in religious rituals, folk or popular festivals and entertainment in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, he probably bore uncanniness characteristic of an adolescent on the threshold between childhood and adulthood, as then and as now.⁸ Thus the boy actor in *As You Like It* is one of the "major" others. We imagine a figure of the boy actor, the radical other, who played another other, Rosalind/Ganymede. Encountering this unfamiliar other as the third gender in the text or on the imaginary stage, we would almost fall into an epistemological void and invoke the marvelous to fill in it.

In *As You Like It* gender brings about a variety of complex effects as wonder, which I can not discuss in this note but will discuss in a separate paper. As

⁸ Lesley Wade Soule, *Actor as Anti-Character: Dionysus, the Devil, and the Boy Rosalind* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000) 112.

mentioned earlier, the marvelous is an epistemological strategy, and in this play it is exactly employed for us to realize that gender is a source of wonder. Unless otherwise, the epistemological void would remain unfilled, leaving us perplexed and incapable of understanding. I am fully aware that this line of argument seems reductionist or circular, and yet I have to say this is the very essence of the paradox of gender.

Gender difference is paradoxical and radically indeterminate. It is an order or pseudo-order that includes disorder; in other words, it is a system of "non-reason." When we perceive "confusion" of gender in *As You Like It* as well as in other comedies such as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*, we assume a certain order. Unless we (mis)recognize such "order," we cannot perceive a "confusion." To our surprise, the play comes to suggest that there is something not quite right about the origin of our knowledge, for we misconceive probably unawares of a pseudo-order as an order, and non-reason as reason. Thoughts on gender thus come to look like a Möbius strip and invite our further speculation.

Finally I would like to bring to notice one of the most important writings in wonder studies in early modern Europe. In his famous essay, "Of the Lame or Cripple," Michel de Montaigne writes:

It is a wonder, to see how from many vaine beginnings and frivolous causes, so famous impressions doe ordinarily arise and ensure.... All these miracles and strange events, are untill this day hidden from me; I have seen no such monster, or more expresse wonder in this world, then myself. *With time and custome a man doth acquaint and enure himself to all strangenesse*; But the more I frequent and know my self the more my deformitie astonish me; and the lesse I understand my self.⁹

Toward the end of this essay, Montaigne comes to acknowledge "knowledge of ignorance" and the power of wonder. However, his speculation is disturbingly

⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. John Florio, 3 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1965) 3rd vol. XI. Of the Lame or Cripple 281-82.

insightful as elsewhere, for while thinking of a variety of others (or otherness) such as “cripple” and “monster” here, he discovers “deformity” – otherness – within himself.

Montaigne’s self-discovery could be suggestive for gender studies. Our knowledge and socio-cultural power that continues to construct the strange system of gender interact with each other. We are socio-cultural beings to such an extent that for us the socio-cultural is “the natural”; thus the binary opposition between nature and culture is absolutely invalid here once again. While on the one hand our knowledge is conditioned by forces of the society and culture in which we were born, on the other it exerts effects over these forces. Yet ourselves that should be the subject of knowledge under certain conditions have potentially the monstrous, the unknown – wonder – within ourselves. That is another radical and challenging paradox of gender and knowledge.