



Boy Heroines

Michael Shapiro; Phyllis Rackin

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make its antifeminist elements no more than inopportune and debilitating interruptions of a standard romance. We would do better to accept that the Wife of Bath is the voice Chaucer assigns to prologue and tale alike and to hear her out. Alison is not a person constrained by plausibility but a fictional voice that knows and can perform whatever is useful to dramatizing the interests attributed to it. Her tendency to slip from the realm of satire into romance and back again is worth considering as her move, one suited to her concern with women's sovereignty.

(23)

This generic mixing is the subject of the article, and Quinn's repeated assertions to the effect that I have "not recognized Chaucer's modification of the genres of antifeminist satire and romance" are simply opaque to me.

Behind Quinn's particular objections, however, lies a discernable critical stance. The praise for Alison's "expressiveness" and ability and for Chaucer's "success," "adroitness," "unique achievement," and "triumph" suggests that Quinn believes I have underestimated the artistic merit of Chaucer's work by arguing that the Wife of Bath is not always coherent. For Quinn, the work's and the character's "success" is in their coherence; the apparent confusions make sense in terms of an argument that women can "achieve better relations between the sexes" by winning power but refusing to exercise it. Quinn is in good critical company. Many scholars argue either that Alison delivers a clear solution to the problem of sovereignty in marriage or that any inconsistencies in her character and narration are to be condemned. A third possibility, I believe, is that Alison's moments of inconsistency are aesthetically significant and carry meaning in the discussion of women's sovereignty. Alison is remarkably articulate, but if we recognize as well her inconsistencies and silences, we can better understand how Chaucer reconsidered courtly and clerical ideologies in their relation to the social world. Surely a poem that attempts to be perfectly clear is not inherently more successful than a poem urged by its own apprehensions of incoherence toward new and as yet unutterable visions.

SUSAN CRANE

Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Boy Heroines

To the Editor:

Phyllis Rackin's article "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage" (102 [1987]: 29-41) is one of very few recent attempts I know of that make critical use of the audience's *dual* awareness of the boy actor behind the female character who dons male disguise. I stress the word *dual* because most other critics have either ignored the theatrical reality of the actor's gender or made it the dominant focus of their concern. Both of these responses may in fact re-

flect those of some Elizabethan spectators, but the same can be said for Rackin's determination to see all facets of the boy/girl/boy figure at one time.

For Rackin, the characters of Portia, Rosalind, and Viola as played by male actors originally represented celebrations in fantasy of an idealized androgyny unavailable in real life. She makes important distinctions among these heroines as well and contrasts them with characters who change gender through miracle or disguise in Lyly's *Gallathea* and Jonson's *Epicoene*, where the idea of androgyny is mocked or denigrated. The contrast between Shakespeare and Jonson leads her to draw larger conclusions about their different notions of mimesis and about changing attitudes toward women.

As astute as I find her critical remarks on the five focal plays, I feel some resistance to these larger conclusions mainly because the differences between Shakespeare and Jonson seem to me to derive from genre (and from individual temperament, which guides writers in their choices of genre). Shakespeare's three heroines appear in romantic comedies. These plays present a vision of love and marriage quite at odds with contemporary social reality, despite token references to money and other economic matters, a vision based on wish fulfillment that Rackin sees as an example of Sidney's golden world. In a note, Rackin acknowledges both Imogen's anomalous relation to this vision and Linda Bamber's attempts to link such differences to differences in dramatic genre, but she does not give sufficient weight to these arguments. Nor does she extend them to Jonson, whom she sees as a proponent of realistic rather than fantastic art and therefore more inclined to imitate social reality or, as she puts it, "the hierarchal relations that . . . society has defined as natural" (34). But Jonson's mimesis is more satiric than realistic, in theory deriving from neoclassic faith in the didactic mirroring of comedy, which also turns up in Sidney's *Apology*, but in practice producing fantastically pejorative distortions of reality. Instead of a boy playing a female transvestite to project an idealized image of androgyny, *Epicoene* includes a boy playing a male transvestite as the bait in a confidence game. Wittipol's female impersonation in *The Devil Is an Ass*, if less mercenary, is equally satiric.

In societies where the status of women is low, male transvestism evokes a more negative response than does female transvestism. I suspect this explains why the female page usually appears in romantic comedy while the boy bride turns up more often in satiric comedy or farce. Jonson provides the exception that proves the rule in *Cynthia's Revels*, where Anaides's "punquetto" Gelaia is revealed to be "a wench in page's attire" (2.2.82-83). One would like to test this hypothesis against the eighty-odd female pages and twenty-odd boy brides listed in Victor Freeburg's *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama*. Given this wealth of material, five plays seem an inadequate basis for generalizations about mimesis and the changing status of women.

Assertive women in male attire like Portia, Rosalind, and Viola and passive female pages like Imogen, Greene's Dorothea in *James IV* (1590), and Fletcher's "Bellario" in *Philaster* (1609) both have their counterparts in romances, novellas, and other nondramatic literary forms. On the stage, as Rackin rightly insists, all these heroines were played by boy actors, which surely made a difference. How audiences perceived these boy players, whether in adult troupes or in children's companies, is too complex an issue to explore here, but I doubt that many spectators pitied them as victims of economic exploitation. Apprentices in adult acting companies were no more (or less) exploited than were other apprentices. Alfred Harbage's sentimental description of the plight of boys in children's troupes (which Rackin quotes in note 11 but places incorrectly in *Shakespeare's Audience* rather than in *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*) is extrapolated from two pieces of biased and possibly misunderstood evidence: a legal brief, "Henry Clifton's bill of complaint against the Chapel company at Blackfriars" over the impressment of his son, and a payment recorded in the Revels Accounts, for the Chapel choristers' journey by boat to Hampton Court on Ash Wednesday, 1574, for "fire & victuals for the children when they landed, some of them being sick and cold and hungry." Even if the boys were as miserably treated offstage as Harbage claims, audiences saw them amidst the glamour and excitement of theatrical performance.

MICHAEL SHAPIRO
University of Illinois, Urbana

Reply:

I want to thank Michael Shapiro, not only for his generous comments about my article but also for correcting the error in note 11. The mistaken attribution crept in between my typescript and the galleys, but I should have caught it in proofreading. As for the validity of Alfred Harbage's evidence about the treatment the boy actors received, I am happy to be instructed by Shapiro, who certainly knows much more about the boy actors than I do. As my extensive citation of his work indicates, my essay relies heavily on his published scholarship on the children's companies, and I am grateful for the additional information he supplies here.

Nonetheless, I think Shapiro misses the point of my statement contrasting the boy actors, who "were either apprentices, the lowliest members of an adult company, or subjected to the miserable conditions of a children's company," to the rich and powerful female characters whose parts they played (33). Shapiro suggests that I, along with Harbage, am "sentimental" in my response to the boys' situation and that I anachronistically attribute this same attitude to Shakespeare's audience. To the first of these charges, I suppose I must plead guilty: Har-

bage seems to pity the boys, and as my use of the term "miserable conditions" indicates, I do too. We all bring emotional baggage to the plays, conditioned by our own experience and the worlds in which we live (in this case, a world that—as Lawrence Stone and others have demonstrated at great length—has vastly changed in its attitudes toward children). As Shapiro observes, the people in Shakespeare's audience, accustomed to the generally hard lot of apprentices, probably felt quite differently. But surely, whether or not Shakespeare or members of his audience pitied the boys—and I was not arguing that they did—they would have recognized that the boys' social status was lower than that of the aristocratic spectators to whom the boys' companies played and also lower than that of the adults to whom the boys were apprenticed in the public theater companies. And this, of course, was my point—that in the status-conscious world of Renaissance England, the discrepancies of social rank and economic power that separated the boy actors from the heroines they portrayed would play a prominent part in what both Shapiro and I see as the audience's "dual awareness" in the presence of a boy actor portraying a female character in masculine disguise.

I must disagree even more strongly with Shapiro when he claims that "the differences between Shakespeare and Jonson . . . derive from genre (and from individual temperament, which guides writers in their choices of genre)." For even if a perfect correspondence between generic form and gender ideology could be established (which I doubt—note, for instance, Shapiro's own example from *Cynthia's Revels* and Shakespeare's practice in *Merry Wives*), the additional question would remain: what makes a particular author or audience prefer one genre over another?

Many factors determine such a choice. As Shapiro recognizes, an author's personal predilections are involved, but so too are many other forces: the taste of the public (which itself is conditioned by all sorts of factors, including but not restricted to what they have already seen in the theater); what can be done technologically; what actors are available; and also the social, economic, and political conditions in which the plays are produced and performed. I tried to give a sense of all these; hence my refusal to privilege genre as the sole determinant. Genre is inevitably implicated in history. Shakespeare's abandonment of romantic comedy after *Twelfth Night* did not take place in a vacuum,¹ and neither did Jonson's production of satiric comedies.²

Shapiro suggests that we might resolve our disagreement by examining the hundred or so female pages and boy brides mentioned in Victor Freeburg's published dissertation (cited in n. 1 of my article). I agree that the hypothesis I have advanced needs more investigation—certainly, but not exclusively, by studying more of the plays that Freeburg cites. I focused on five plays that were successful in their own time and that also exercised important influence on subsequent playwrights. Freeburg

cites lost plays, plays that were never performed on stage, and many plays that were all but forgotten in subsequent years. Although any play can be said to respond to the pressures of its time—social, political, and cultural, as well as literary and theatrical—a successful play not only articulates and affects the concerns of its audience; it also conditions their responses. A play successful in a subsequent period articulates and affects the concerns of *that* audience. The satiric distortions in *Epicoene* expressed anxieties and aspirations that Jonson shared with his audience; they also helped to construct a gender ideology that has not yet lost its power.

PHYLLIS RACKIN
University of Pennsylvania

¹ As Leonard Tennenhouse has recently pointed out (in *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, New York: Methuen, 1986), "Shakespeare was not alone in abandoning romantic comedy after 1602 . . . none of his fellow dramatists took up the form again either . . ." (3). Tennenhouse argues, in fact, that an excessive preoccupation with "generic categories automatically detaches the work from history": "So long as discussion of the plays remains within the conventional literary genres. . . . [o]ne cannot explain why certain forms were abandoned, why others were taken up, or why a genre might turn against itself and openly renounce a logic that was one and the same as its form during an earlier period of time" (5, 4).

² As Shapiro himself has pointed out (in *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays*, New York: Columbia UP, 1977), *Epicoene* typifies the satiric city comedies of its time, in which an attractive young gallant, who "has a moral if not a legal claim to . . . land or money," must obtain it from a "miserly father-figure" (56-57).

"Our Ever-Living Poet"

To the Editor:

Donald W. Foster's "Master W. H., R.I.P." (102 [1987]: 42-54) was a delight to read. I hope that his inspired research and thinking will indeed lay the W. H. brouhaha to rest forever. For if the notion of proof has any meaning at all in the arts, Foster has demonstrated that Thorpe's readers—readers who had no incentive to go searching after bizarre usages of common words—*must* have understood "begetter" in this particular context as "author" and, what is equally important, that Thorpe *must* have known, as he dashed off the dedication, that his readers would so understand it. Ineluctably, therefore, W. H. has to be a typographical error.

My guess is that Foster will find less enthusiasm with respect to his second hypothesis, to wit that "our ever-living poet" is God. If the wording had been "*the* ever-living poet," his case would have acquired some solidity. But, unlike "our Lord" or "our Saviour," "our poet" is

simply too familiar in this context, and the whole conceit too strained. In this instance, I believe that the thriftier hypothesis remains the one, rejected by Foster, naming the poet as Shakespeare himself. "The sonnets," Foster writes, "strictly speaking, promise 'eternity' to no one. We find, admittedly, the conventional boast that poets may confer a kind of immortality, but not everlastingly" (48). I don't know what this second sentence means, but the point here is that Tom Thorpe was not a professor of literature dependent for survival on "strictly speaking" analysis but a literary businessman. To him and to most of his readers (and to most of us), the sonnets seem to do a great deal of promising in the "eternity" line. Hence there is no strain whatsoever in interpreting Thorpe's convoluted compliment as "I wish you the same eternity you promise others in your sonnets" or "May you in fact enjoy the eternity (of fame) you have promised yourself in the poems." Whatever Shakespeare's popularity may have been in 1609, the compliment, or puff, of "ever-living" seems like a credible move by a publisher.

Of course, the identity of this "ever-living poet" is a far less interesting problem than that of W. H., and Foster's solution of the more interesting of the two problems calls for a resounding bravo.

OSCAR MANDEL
California Institute of Technology

To the Editor:

Donald Foster is right in stating that the "begetter" in the epigraph to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* must be the author. He is also right in saying that it doesn't make much sense to wish the author the eternity promised by himself. Therefore "our ever-living poet" may refer to God. The epigraph makes the best sense if one assumes that in 1609 the author was deceased (as was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford). Then the "only" preceding "begetter" does assure the reader that the work is authentic, as Humphrey Moseley does more lengthily in his prefatory note to William Cartwright's posthumous *Comedies, Tragedies, with Other Poems*. Since, as Foster also points out, in the Renaissance "ever-living" was never used about a living person, if "ever-living poet" does refer to a man, he certainly cannot be the Stratfordian. Also, since in the dedications that Foster cites, the dedicatee is not the author, there is certainly something fishy about dedicating a work "to" the begetter if he is alive, but it is not so peculiar if he is not. Most of the dedications Foster cites also refer to happiness *in this world* and eternity in the next. Of course Thorpe or W. H. or whoever wrote the epigraph couldn't guarantee that, so he rather loosely wished the poet heaven and eternity in suggestive terms, as appropriate for a deceased poet.

As more and more evidence of earlier work by Shakespeare emerges (the hyphen definitely indicates a pseudo-