

**Having It Both Ways: Cross-Dressing in Orton's
What the Butler Saw and Churchill's *Cloud Nine***

Margaret Macintyre and David Buchbinder*

FLUTE--Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming.

QUINCE--That's all one. You shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

BOTTOM--An I may hide my face, let me play Thisby too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice:--"Thisne, Thisne!"
"Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear, thy Thisby dear, and lady dear!

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.ii.41-48)

How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum*, the position of victim?

(Hélène Cixous, "Aller à la mer," trans. Barbara Kerslake)

* Margaret Macintyre and David Buchbinder are lecturers in the school of Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University of Technology, in Western Australia. Ms. Macintyre is interested in drama and theory, with an emphasis on feminist and Australian plays. Dr. Buchbinder's special areas include poetry, literary theory and the literature of the Renaissance.

"A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the Lord thy God" (Deut. 22:5). Despite the Biblical stricture against one sex's dressing up as the other, as a cultural phenomenon transvestism has always been socially sanctioned upon specific occasions, and for specific purposes, as Bakhtin has noted in his study of medieval carnival; yet, in Western culture at least, as the frequent citing of the passage from Deuteronomy shows, it has at the same time been perceived as a threat to the social construction of gender, and hence to the social order as a whole. Mechanisms and codes were therefore devised to control and contain such a threat. Thus, in the Middle Ages, as Vern L. Bullough observes, while the Church did not actively *encourage* transvestism, it countenanced at least one kind, namely, female-to-male. When a man dressed as a woman, he was likely to lose the status which the culture automatically conferred upon men. On the other hand, when a woman dressed as a man, she was symbolically endowed with his attributes of rationality and order; and, provided she did not become aggressively "masculine," she partially exceeded the limitations of her gender. Because the act of transvestism separated the woman who engaged in it from others of her kind, it neutralized any danger to the masculine world (Bullough and Brundage 43-54).¹

Nevertheless, in general, transvestism, especially male transvestism, has been viewed in Western society as a sexual deviation. There is, however, a space in which transvestism has traditionally been sanctioned, namely, the theatre, where cross-dressing has enjoyed a long and--if durability alone were sufficient testimony to dignity--even a noble history. Though male-to-female transvestism was officially regarded as degrading, in the theatre such cross-dressing was approved, given that, until the seventeenth century (with occasional exceptions), women were forbidden to act, and the roles of female characters had to be taken by men. Consequently, the theatre was one sphere in which "Status loss [for men] was tolerated and encouraged when society might otherwise have been threatened" (Bullough and Brundage 52), in this case by the sight of women immodestly displaying themselves upon the stage, and hence assuming a public visibility incompatible with the role traditionally assigned to them.

One would expect that questions about gender raised by the cultural practice of transvestism would also have been asked about its socially-sanctioned use in the theatre. Yet Nancy S. Reinhardt observes that little work has been done--at least in English--in theorizing gender as a performative act on the stage ("New Directions" 377). In this paper we discuss a stage practice which foregrounds questions about gender, namely, cross-dressing. We will reserve this term to

signify the theatrical practice, and will retain "transvestism" to describe the social phenomenon. Each of these terms functions within a larger cultural discourse of gender; but whereas transvestism may function to question the discourse of gender, cross-dressing has generally remained powerfully conservative.

Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* may stand as an example of a contemporary play which uses the device of cross-dressing to point out the cultural construction of gender, and apparently to subvert it; nonetheless, although Orton's theatrical ingenuity produces brilliant and often exhilarating comedy, his play finally remains faithful to the conservative tradition of cross-dressing. On the other hand, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* also points to the cultural construction of gender, but is a feminist text which attempts a more radical interrogation of the issues involved. While Orton's play may be the more polished of the two, it succeeds precisely through its fidelity to the familiar codes of farce, which include the device of cross-dressing. Churchill's play, by contrast, both acknowledges and works against that inherited tradition of cross-dressing, and, in offering a critique of it, tries to prevent the audience from simply returning to existing definitions of male and female.

In the theatre cross-dressing has traditionally taken two forms. The first, which we have described above, was made necessary by the proscription or absence of women from the stage, and was the cross-dressing of the male *actor* into the female character. The second was made possible by the imaginative, fictional nature of drama, and allowed a *character* of one sex to cross-dress as the other, regardless of cultural strictures against transvestism. The presence of women actors on the stage in seventeenth-century Europe necessarily transformed the relationship between these two kinds of cross-dressing. Since actor-to-character cross-dressing was no longer strictly necessary, its persistence, for example, in pantomime, suggests a popular fascination with transvestism in general, which in turn points to often suppressed anxieties in the culture with regard to gender roles. The theater remained a marginal area between cultural reality and imaginative possibility, in which prescriptions such as the relation of gender to dress could be violated with impunity and enjoyment.

That men were once able to perform women's roles on the stage without necessarily losing status² supports Nancy Reinhardt's contention that Western theatre (at least until recently) has always been a masculine space (371-373). The codes that "realize" femininity in the theatre, no matter whether the female character is played by a man or a woman, are therefore likely to be patriarchal in nature. The persuasiveness of the impersonation is then to be judged by how far it corresponds to the male view of what is feminine.³ In those theatres

where a male actor had to take a woman's part, his body became the vehicle on which the signs of femininity were inscribed through the codes of costume, makeup and gesture. For the impersonation to work, these signs of gender had to be conventionalized, so that the audience could "read" the character as feminine.

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, however, because of changes in performance codes in general, the degree of impersonation may have been significantly greater than, say, in Greek theatre (see Rackin 35), though of course evidence of this is notoriously scanty. Nevertheless, that so many plays of this period exploit the ambiguity of the actor's gender in his cross-dressing from actor to character, and frequently also from character to character, suggests that there may have been a need to emphasize the virtuosity of the impersonation by reminding the audience that the player was male, a fact that a convincing performance was--ironically--designed to make them forget. Moreover, only when the actor's performance was credible could any manipulation of gender identity--which came close to destroying the theatrical illusion of gender differences on the stage--actually work.

Such manipulation necessarily involved, too, a sense of play or game with the notion of gender on the stage--a kind of conjuring trick of the "Now you see it, now you don't" variety to which the audience was an accomplice. The fact that games were played with the gender of the actor *vis-à-vis* that of the character immensely complicated this discourse on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, as Catherine Belsey observes (166-190). Arguably, then, the manipulation of gender on the Elizabethan stage was potentially a powerful subversion of that discourse.

However, since much of the play with gender on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage was intrinsically erotic, one might question the degree to which the discourse of gender was indeed subverted. In a disguise plot, for instance, the audience's awareness of the female-to-male masquerade of the character was layered over an awareness of the male-to-female disguise of the actor. As a result, the performance, as Lisa Jardine argues, hovered tantalizingly between heteroeroticism and a suggested homoeroticism. It thus became a discourse directed always at a male audience which was merely intensified by the disguise plot (Jardine 9-36). This discourse ironically required that the true sex of the actor remain teasingly undefined and unrevealed. Gender multiplication of this kind might have challenged the way in which the culture constructed such identity, but in fact the true sex of the actor was concealed and an illusory gender, required by the play, substituted. Thus, the potential for subverting the cultural discourse of gender through the play with gender was never completely realized.

In this theatre there is, on the one hand, a residue of the conventional or "normalized" representation of the feminine necessary to the act of impersonation, and, on the other, a revelling in the erotic possibilities offered by such a performance. Inevitably, with the lifting in the seventeenth century of the prohibition against actresses, a change took place in the nature of this performance. In England, at least, the change was seen as a civilizing and progressive measure, in that it "returned" the theatre to gender definitions which obtained in the culture and which were regarded as normative. Ironically, the theatre had rarely reflected such definitions, and the "normalizing" of gender on the stage in fact reaffirmed its social construction. The appearance of actresses on the stage thus eliminated the need for a conventionalizing of the feminine by a cross-dressed male actor, at the same time intensifying and narrowing the erotic focus through the resolution of gender ambiguities present in the earlier theatre.

Where the inscription of the signs of femininity on the male actor's body had meant that the erotic, if present, was invested in the *signs*, the female character in this later theatre was incarnated in the body of the female actor; and since she was inevitably seen through masculine eyes, an eroticizing of the *body* rather than of the *signs* took place. Despite the fact that women now played themselves on the stage, gender, as Rackin observes, "is a kind of act for all women" (29). Actresses played two parts: specifically, their stage characters, and also, more generally, women. They consequently became doubly the objects of a voyeuristic male gaze which, originating outside the theatre, exceeded the limits of the theatre itself. The actress/woman was regarded as sexually available. (There is some evidence, indeed, that the Elizabethan boy actor had been similarly regarded.⁴)

Despite the apparent normalization of gender on the stage with the advent of actresses, cross-dressing continued to fascinate both performers and audiences. However, as Foucault has pointed out in *The History of Sexuality*, it was at this time that, in Western culture, definitions of gender became fixed and valorized in their present terms. Transvestism as a cultural practice therefore took on different meaning. In the theatre, the meaning of the act of cross-dressing, apparently simplified by the presence of women actors, became complicated by the nature of the act itself, that is, whether it was, first, actor-to-character or character-to-character, and, second, whether it was male-to-female or female-to-male. Cross-dressing from actor to character did not disappear and can be traced, for instance, in the figures of the Principal Boy and the Dame in pantomime. The important feature is whether the disguise is female-to-male or male-to-female. In the case of the Principal Boy, the character (and hence also the female actor) was eroticized, while in the case of the Dame,

the character tended toward a caricature of femininity rather than a potentially erotic impersonation of it. In both cases, the cultural construction of gender remained unaffected, and in the latter case we see a reflection, perhaps, of the culture's anxiety regarding transvestism, the homoerotic and homosexuality in general.

The same valorization which allows female-to-male impersonation to be eroticized (but not male-to-female) manifested itself, on the one hand, in caricature roles, such as Charley's Aunt, and, on the other, in the ever popular breeches role. The travesty role did not, however, point to any resistance to male constructions of femininity: the actress' body was inscribed with the conventional signs of masculine identity, but not its accompanying power.

Because many roles originally intended for male actors were "feminized," and made into breeches parts, without demanding any exposure of gender, less emphasis was placed on the "disguise" plot, with its alluring promise that, as gender is revealed, the complications will be unravelled, and the play brought to its close. Peg Woffington's famous breeches-role performance as Sir Harry Wildair in Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* may serve as an example of the way in which such roles could be eroticized: she was praised for her impersonation of a debonair young gallant, yet it is clear from contemporary accounts that what the audience saw was a very attractive woman playing a man. (Indeed, it seems that only attractive actresses were given breeches parts.) Masculinity in such a role is thus clearly defined as a mere simulation, and the actress remains an object of male voyeurism.⁵

It should also be noted that such breeches roles, approved by the culture as primarily heteroerotic, in fact could permit the homoerotic option in cross-dressing. The operatic trouser-role takes advantage of this option by presenting women singing the roles of young men, a tradition that derives from the disappearance of the sexually ambiguous castrato from the operatic stage at the end of the eighteenth century. Like the castrato himself, such trouser roles could provide an occasion for scandal and titillation of the audience. Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, quite a late example of this practice, powerfully exploits these erotic ambiguities. Early audiences were outraged by the opening spectacle of the Marschallin, a soprano, in bed with Octavian, the mezzosoprano "male" lead.⁶

Though men were no longer required to impersonate women on the stage, and despite the strong interest in female cross-dressing, there were still opportunities for men to get into women's clothes, if only in the cause of comedy. Comic or burlesque cross-dressed performances were always available in earlier comedy; however, it is with the disappearance of the boy actor and his ambiguously erotic

sexuality that the comic or burlesque role became the usual impersonation of women by male actors. Male-to-female cross-dressing seems, as a consequence, to have retreated to the comic-burlesque, a move which produced a line of particular cross-dressed roles for men, found--as we might expect--in the popular theatre of burlesque, pantomime and farce. Not designed primarily as erotic displays, such roles were intended rather to amuse audiences with gross theatrical caricatures of femininity which both affirmed cultural definitions of gender and, by sanctioning it in the theatre, allayed social anxieties associated with male transvestism (and in fact continue to do so).

The brief survey we have undertaken of the history of theatrical cross-dressing suggests, then, that the single most important event in the history of cross-dressing in Western theatre was the appearance of women actors, an event which produced shifts in the representation and signification of gender on the stage. The survey also suggests that any form of cross-dressing has the potential to interrogate culturally derived notions of gender and gender-role, but that in the past such notions were usually confirmed, not challenged, by the act of cross-dressing. This we can see from the examples of the breeches parts, or of the caricatured notions of femininity present in figures such as Charley's Aunt or the Panto Dame.⁷ Nevertheless, though theatrical cross-dressing serves to allay certain cultural anxieties by acting them out, and thus reaffirms the distinction between masculine and feminine, it struggles at the same time to erase that difference. As Cheryl Herr observes:

First, . . . [the cross-dressed actor] acted out the culture's confusion over sexual identity--and its fear of deviations from the norm. Second--and somewhat contradictorily--this acting was a censored announcement that male and female need not be mutually exclusive categories . . . (276)

This contradiction suggests that the tradition of theatrical cross-dressing is traversed by a gap potentially open to radical discourses attempting to subvert or intending to interrogate culturally received notions of gender.

It is against the whole tradition, then, of cross-dressing that Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* need to be read. As one might expect, each of these texts responds to still-powerful post-seventeenth-century developments in that tradition. However, whereas Orton's play accepts and complies with these, Churchill's offers a resistance to them by returning in part to an earlier moment in the history of theatrical cross-dressing.

Orton's play, which we will consider first, earned a certain

notoriety during the 1960s for its apparent subversion of dominant cultural attitudes and ideologies, including those relating to gender; but in fact it only plays with the anxieties and taboos concerning gender roles without seriously questioning them. Orton's adherence to the later tradition of cross-dressing is attested, for instance, by his blatant eroticizing of the female body of the actor/character; and by his use of the breeches role, familiar to audiences since the seventeenth century. In Orton's hands, this becomes an impudent device: an instance of forced disguise in which Geraldine Barclay is compelled to strip to her underwear and then don male attire.

As a complementary gesture and a modish breaking of existing taboos on homosexuality, the male body is also eroticized: in another instance of enforced disrobing and robbing, Nicholas Beckett also strips and then puts on his twin sister Geraldine's clothing. But where, in his male-to-female actor-to-character disguise as a woman, the Elizabethan boy actor always remained sexually ambiguous, the audience of Orton's play is never in any doubt about Nicholas' sex. Nicholas, in his character-to-character disguise, is offered to Orton's audience principally as an object of homoerotic desire, and does not participate in the earlier use of cross-dressing, which encouraged a fusion of the hetero- and homoerotic. The audience of *What the Butler Saw* must then acknowledge the possibility that homosexuality might be fun, but not to consider seriously the potential interrogation of gender within such gender-play. That women in the audience might well, like Mrs. Prentice, appreciate Nicholas' body is a dividend yielded by Orton's investment in the traditional breeches role, women usually being denied the opportunity to view the male body on the stage in the same way that men since the seventeenth century have been permitted to gaze at the female body.

The audience of Orton's play, both male and female, is thus converted into a crowd of voyeurs who watch the increasingly frantic dressing and undressing of the characters, a process whose naughtiness is typical of farce, but whose lack of coyness is Orton's own. Mrs. Prentice's query of her husband, "Have you taken up transvestism? I had no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion" (373), highlights Orton's sensitivity to currents in intellectual and social chic, and his desire to send them up.

Her remark may stand, moreover, as a comment on the play itself. Orton's ostensible subversion of culturally constructed notions of gender, accomplished partly by dallying with transvestism, invites the audience to relish his violation of cultural boundaries between the sexes. However, the text thereby implies that issues of gender and sexual orientation can be reduced to costume, a radical simplification but not a radical interrogation of this discourse. Moreover, because

the play recycles familiar codes of theatrical cross-dressing, the violation is never really complemented by a need for the audience seriously to question issues of sex and gender.

In *What the Butler Saw*, Orton's point that clothes make the man--or woman--does not offer the audience new ways of thinking about gender. Rather, the laughter aroused by the farcical shedding and putting on of clothing reassures the audience that they are on familiar ground: they see what they have seen before. Significantly, the play concludes with the lines, "I'm glad you don't despise tradition. Let us put on our clothes and face the world" (448). The play, true to the nature of farce, has created a ludic space in which these crazy goings-on can occur. Moreover, because the setting is actually a loony space--a private lunatic asylum--it invites us to read it as the well-oiled, smoothly-running, but totally self-enclosed system characteristic of farce itself. The events of the play, then, constitute an interval in "reality": the characters will return to the world and their public selves, which, presumably, include the social construction of gender which Orton has--apparently--sabotaged.

Because Orton makes transvestism an issue in the plot, both by including it in the dialogue, and by allowing the audience to witness the process of cross-dressing, he carelessly collapses a social phenomenon which poses a real question about gender and is therefore problematic to society, with a conservative tradition of cross-dressing which has generally escaped the opprobrium often attached to transvestism. The result is ambivalence and contradiction, as the theatrical tradition neutralizes the problem posed by the social issue of transvestism. Thus, Geraldine Barclay is twice made into a voyeuristic object: not only does she take off her own clothes, but also, in donning Nicholas Beckett's page-boy uniform, she comes to resemble the Principal Boy in pantomime, itself a typical breeches role.⁸

The case of Geraldine Barclay points to two important features in Orton's play. In the first place, none of the characters ever strips completely naked, despite the teasing possibility that they may do so at any moment, and thereby violate the code which requires the cross-dressed characters to keep their actual sex secret. Yet we are obsessively reminded of genital difference. "Don't remove your drawers," Prentice says to him. "My medical training has familiarized me with what is underneath" (397); so we never get to see Nicholas knickerless. Likewise, Rance commands Geraldine, "Take your trousers down. I'll tell you which sex you belong to" (413), another unfulfilled promise.

Indeed, biological difference can never be revealed, if the voyeuristic and erotic effect of concealment is to be sustained. So the playwright refuses any unmistakable and irrevocable revelation of gender through genitalia. It is, therefore, deliciously ironic that the

play is devoted to the recovery of the missing private part of Sir Winston Churchill's statue, and this may be the only naughty bit the audience gets to see, although even here, because of the alternative endings, this consummation may also be denied.

As Peter Ackroyd's book *Dressing Up* points out, no matter how completely the transvestite attempts to assume the behavior and costume of the opposite sex, the impersonation is always incomplete. Orton's play suggests, in addition, that this is essential if the audience is to experience the thrill of the erotic. In this, again, *What the Butler Saw* belongs squarely to the theatrical tradition of cross-dressing which we have noted in reference to the breeches role: however fine the impersonation, the audience remains aware of the true sex beneath the costume. Orton's play emphasizes the gap already to be found in such an impersonation.

Another character in *What the Butler Saw* who cross-dresses is Sergeant Match, whose costume, the uniform and helmet of the English bobby, suggests the phallic, and whose transformation into a kind of Dionysus represents the comic apotheosis of gender duality. One of the intertexts of Orton's play is clearly *The Bacchae*, in which Pentheus is cross-dressed as a woman, and in which the effeminate Dionysus contains both male and female. Sergeant Match seems at first glance an unlikely candidate for the role of the androgynous deity--a mismatch--so that his appearance in the leopard-spotted dress--Miss Match--defines him as a caricature of femininity. The exposure of the gap which we have identified between gender impersonation and actual sex becomes almost the point of such a performance as Sergeant Match's. Orton thus points to a kind of transvestism which appears outside the theatre (as, for example, in the drag routine) while returning to the theatrical tradition of the caricature of femininity by male actors, which includes such examples as the Panto Dame. Once again Orton swerves, in the way he uses the comic tradition of cross-dressing, from a serious interrogation of gender: at the same time that the text makes the homoerotic entertaining, and thus safe for male heterosexuals to laugh at, it also imposes a male perspective on the female viewer, in whose laughter at Orton's travesty of femininity can be heard echoing the amusement of past audiences witnessing similar spectacles. Like Rance, Orton refuses to "be a party to the wanton destruction of a fine old tradition" (429), and while he might agree with Nick that "transvestism is no longer held to be a dangerous debilitating vice" (433), he nonetheless keeps it securely contained, its capacity to subvert safely neutralized.

Compared to Orton's treatment of both gender and cross-dressing in *What the Butler Saw*, Churchill's *Cloud Nine* is more complex and more open-ended in its exploration of the same issues, as well as more

resistant to the tradition which Orton celebrates with such panache. While Orton forces his audience into complicity with him by requiring a passive enjoyment of the voyeuristic spectacle unfolding before them, Churchill, in a play which moves from colonial Africa to contemporary London, does more than encourage her audience simply to lie back and think of England.

Both Orton and Churchill combine the tradition of theatrical cross-dressing with the conventions of farce, to shock a complacent audience into awareness of current social assumptions and values. However, unlike Orton, Churchill challenges the audience to look differently at the question of gender, in part by manipulating the tradition of cross-dressing in the theatre. Whereas Orton's play fails to anticipate the way in which the tradition is capable of contradicting any radical statement which its author may have wished to make, Churchill's play, aware of this possibility, takes it into account.

From the start, she defamiliarizes the act of cross-dressing, which is not demanded by the plot: hers are actor-to-character impersonations, not, as in *What the Butler Saw*, character-to-character disguises. In this, Churchill reintroduces a pre-seventeenth-century tradition of cross-dressing, and in this re-presentation of gender through costume invites us to reassess both the nature of gender and the post-seventeenth-century tradition of cross-dressing. An older tradition is thus made to interrogate a more recent one.

In Act One, which takes place in the Victorian era, Churchill amusingly anatomizes a divided and rigid society which places certain kinds of behavior, sexual and otherwise, under official interdict, but at the same time clandestinely violates its own proscriptions as a matter of course. Churchill accomplishes this partly through manipulation of cross-dressing, which, in Act One, is allied to the conventions of farce. Marriage and the family define those relationships which are acceptable; those which are not are outlawed. These include adultery, homosexuality (both male and female), and infantile sexuality, which are found not only to cross boundaries of race and social status, but also to permit definitions of gender which undermine those Victorian ideals.

In this act, cross-dressing allows Churchill to expose the hidden discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism by forcing a confrontation between the actual identity and/or gender of the actor/actress and those of the character he/she plays. There are three cases of actor-to-character cross-dressing in the play as a whole: Betty, Clive's wife, played by a man in Act One, but by a woman in Act Two; Edward, Clive's son, played by a woman in Act One, but by a man in Act Two; and Cathy, Vicky's young child, in Act Two played by an adult male. In addition, a black is played by a white, and a

child by a doll; and, as we have just seen, there are two children played by adults. The act of cross-dressing is thus shown to be symbolic of disguise in general, both on the stage and in society. Disguise, then, in *Cloud Nine*, is actually a mode of existence, rather than a plot device, as in *What the Butler Saw*.

Churchill anticipates the audience's conditioned response to the combination of farce and cross-dressing by providing a certain degree of titillation—for instance, the unedifying spectacle of the patriarchal, upright Clive on his knees under the crinoline of Mrs. Saunders, who is an ironization of the familiar figure of the sexually insatiable "widdler lady." In this scene, costume is the device by which the sexual encounter takes place, and thus focuses the audience's attention on the relation of costume to gender elsewhere in the play. Other encounters, such as that between "Uncle" Harry and young Edward, Clive's son, which combines elements of incest and pederasty, are also likely to shock the audience. However, the potentially distasteful nature of these episodes is neutralized by the use of cross-dressed actors, and Churchill's take-it-or-leave-it presentation of such incidents questions the nature, presence and effect of titillation in plays which combine farce and cross-dressing.

Whereas, in Act One, the Victorian age, with its repressions and its rituals, lends itself to farcical treatment, Act Two takes place in the second Elizabethan age, less distant from the audience and therefore more appropriate to a serious consideration of the dilemmas and difficulties a modern audience confronts. What was forbidden in Act One becomes permissible in Act Two. This implies a lifting of the constraints and pressures that produced the series of disguises in Act One, signalled by the reduction in cross-dressed roles in Act Two. Betty and Edward can, in a sense, play themselves, though these are *new selves*, because they have begun to come to terms with their gender identities. However, the fact that Cathy, the young child, is played by a man reminds the audience that the perpetuation of socially constructed gender is still an issue. Thus, though the characters may have redefined their gender roles, they have not necessarily resolved their difficulties. Where Orton encourages us to amuse ourselves with the spectacle of a confusion of gender identities, Churchill clearly offers us an image of the bewilderment and pain that has followed our liberation from the past, a liberation which, like the act of cross-dressing itself, is apparently incomplete.

Even though the play investigates seriously as well as humorously the way in which women are seen and see themselves through male eyes, it resists transforming the audience into the crowd of voyeurs that gape at *What the Butler Saw*. The shock administered in *Cloud Nine* by the cross-dressing is not meant to be merely shocking.

Churchill's aim is not chiefly to tease the audience with the arousing spectacle of one sex in the other's pants. Nor is she interested in amusing the audience with a caricature of femininity: for this reason, she is at pains to avoid making Betty (when played by a man) into a Sergeant Match. By her own admission, Churchill wants us to forget that Betty is played by a man, yet specifies that the sex of the actor who plays her should remain apparent (Keyssar 213).

As we have seen, incompleteness is part of the meaning of the performative act of cross-dressing, and can be used to eroticize either the role or the actor. But in *Cloud Nine*, this gap is deliberately left visible, in order to bring cross-dressing back to the sort of conventionality it enjoyed on the Greek or Elizabethan stages, but in a new ideological context. Once again the signs of gender are inscribed on the body of the actor, to be read principally as signifying gender, but with a consciousness of the later theatrical tradition which eroticized or caricatured femininity through the technique of cross-dressing. Because of the ideological statements that Churchill wants to make, we are encouraged, on the one hand, to forget the real sex of the actor by accepting conventionalized stage markers of gender; on the other hand, we are paradoxically invited to remain aware of that sex, in order to apprehend the social constructions of gender, unquestioned by the post-seventeenth-century use of cross-dressed actors. Thus, because the cross-dressed actors in *Cloud Nine* speak from two gender positions, the audience must re-evaluate both the device of cross-dressing as a theatrical phenomenon, and the nature of gender as fixed and determinable. Churchill renovates an older theatrical tradition by using it to explore the feminine rather than the masculine experience of our culture. In this way, she points out how the older and canonized tradition of cross-dressing appropriates the feminine experience and assimilates it to the masculine, closing it off and rendering it harmless.⁹

These two plays indicate that the theatrical tradition of cross-dressing potentially contains two discourses. The first, represented by *What the Butler Saw*, has a long history, but leaves largely unexplored questions about gender and its construction, preferring instead erotic and caricatured versions of femininity which are defined and sustained by dominant cultural ideologies. The second, of which *Cloud Nine* may serve as an example, functions as a counter-discourse, anticipating and querying precisely that which the other ignores or neglects, and returning to an older conventionalization of cross-dressing. Thus the thrill of the naughty is diminished, and cross-dressing is reinscribed as a theatrical sign system among other such systems, demonstrating that it need not be suffused with the powerful ideological imperatives which pervade the tradition. This constitutes a new ideological

statement which annuls the older definition of the theatre as a safe place for transvestism. Because, despite its apparent radicalism, Orton's play accepts that definition, *What the Butler Saw* preserves the theatre as a space in which transvestism may continue to flourish as a source of entertainment, and thus sustains the prevailing social construction of gender. Churchill's play, on the other hand, works to desecrate that sanctuary by juxtaposing an older tradition of cross-dressing with a newer one. Whether *Cloud Nine* successfully achieves this aim, it exposes the need for feminist playwrights to resist the pressure of history inside the theatre as well as outside.

Curtin University of Technology
Bentley, Western Australia

Notes

1. The case of Elizabeth I is exemplary in this regard. As Montrose points out, the cultivation of the Queen's public image as Amazonian warrior (among other such images—for instance, that of the imperial votaress) functioned to separate her from the limitations imposed by the culture upon her sex and to reinscribe her as a woman in the patriarchal discourse of power without challenging that discourse.

2. As Froma I. Zeitlin observes in an exploration of gender construction in Aristophanic comedy, the male actor's impersonation of a female character was assessed in terms of his artistry, while the cross-dressing of a male character to a female "attracts all the scorn and abuse which the culture—and comedy—can muster" ("Travesties" 140).

3. An argument can be made that characterizations resistant to this male-dominated discourse emerged, particularly during the Renaissance. However, even such types as warrior-women and Amazons can have meaning only when defined differentially against the normative masculine view of femininity on the stage. Moreover, these types are debatably manifestations of male fantasies about women such as are still to be found today, for example, *Wonder Woman*.

4. The character of Alfred in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* exploits the comic and pathetic possibilities in the sexual degradation of the boy actor on the Elizabethan stage.

5. The breeches role later created an opportunity for women to appropriate tragic male characters (as in Sarah Bernhardt's performance as Hamlet) without foregrounding the erotic element in the travesty role. However, such appropriations must inevitably affect the audience's reception of the performance.

6. Further erotic twists could be added by requiring the cross-dressed female singer to cross-dress again, this time as a woman, as we can see in the character of Cherubino in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*; Octavian's performance as the Marschallin's maidservant Mariandel is burlesque rather than erotic, though Baron Ochs's lewd overtures to "her" may be seen as belonging to the eroticizing tradition in cross-dressing. It might be remarked in passing, incidentally, that Strauss seems to have been interested in the question of the definition of gender through cross-dressing, as can be seen in his different treatments of the subject in operas like *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Arabella*, and *Die schweigsame Frau*, the latter based on Jonson's *Epicoene*.

7. We might note in passing that such underwriting of gender roles through cross-dressing has also been imported into the cinema, and can be seen in such films as *Some Like It Hot*, and even in such an apparently feminist text as *Tootsie*; the television series *Bosom Buddies* likewise draws on this tradition. These non-theatrical examples also tend toward caricatured depictions of femininity which ultimately reassure viewers broadly about gender and particularly about their own genders.

8. Cf. Cixous, who remarks that playing the role of a woman in the theatre "still involves playing the Role, maintaining the *ancien régime* of performance and mirror-gazing; it encourages the double perversion of voyeurism and exhibitionism ..." (547).

9. *Cloud Nine* is not the only play in which Churchill uses the device of cross-dressing to raise issues of gender (see, for instance, *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*); however, *Cloud Nine* is the only play to date in which she combines the conventions of cross-dressing with those of farce, a traditional double-act since the seventeenth century. Other playwrights have also taken advantage of the potentially radical possibilities of cross-dressing to ask questions about the nature of the theatre and the social construction of gender. Moreover, theatre companies may similarly choose to use actor-to-character cross-dressing in order to challenge the nature of the theatrical institution, which has always been rigidly divided along gender lines.

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