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TRANSMISOGYNY IN POPULAR CULTURE, FEMINISMS, AND SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

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Abstract

In this article, I deal with the disparagement of femininity and trans persons in multiple levels of our culture, including in some feminist theory and Shakespeare studies. I point out that contemporary culture, patriarchal institutions, and some feminist positions share misogynistic stances towards expressions and embodiments of femininity; and, these perspectives carry over into academic institutions, scholarship, and classrooms. I examine the double-standard that is often applied to feminine-gender behavior and bodies in contemporary culture and the profession. In so doing, I address the points of tension and common ground between feminist, queer, and transgender theories in popular culture and the field of Shakespeare and early modern studies. In addition, I advocate and suggest ways to implement transfeminist approaches to teaching Shakespeare within the contexts of popular culture and contemporary media.

About the Author

Lisa S. Starks (she/her/hers) is Professor of English at University of South Florida. Her books include the monograph *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* (Palgrave, 2014), the edited collection *Ovid and Adaptation in Early Modern English Theatre* (Edinburgh UP, 2020), and the co-edited collections *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002), and *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002). She is currently writing a new monograph, tentatively titled *Shakespeare, Levinas, and Adaptation*, under contract with Edinburgh UP.



Transfeminism challenges normalizing views on gender that are not always explicitly articulated in Shakespeare studies, such as the perception that transmasculine characters symbolize emancipation and empowerment. These challenges to normalizing views have a specific history in Shakespeare studies. Back in 1995, I participated in a very large seminar at the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) Annual Meeting, “Problematic Alliances: Feminism and Queer Theory in Early Modern Studies,” led by Jean Howard and Nicholas Radel. That seminar addressed conflicts between feminism and the relatively new field of queer theory, working towards a coalition between the two fields. In my seminar paper, I examined misogyny, feminism, and its relationship to homophobia. At that time, problematic alliances were also being forged in response to conflicts erupting between feminisms, queer theory, and the emergent field of transgender studies.

Nevertheless, these debates and coalitions surrounding transgender theory occurred mostly outside of Shakespeare and early modern studies, and have remained so—at least in a major way—until only recently (see Joubin’s Introduction to this issue, 5–11). At the Shakespeare Association of America Annual Meetings, Simone Chess and Will Fisher led a seminar on Early Modern Trans* History in 2017; Sawyer Kemp presented a paper on transgender rhetoric and representation in 2018; and the first panel session on Shakespeare and Transgender Theory, organized and led by Alexa Alice Joubin, was held in 2019.¹ That SAA meeting was followed by the Early Modern Trans Studies Conference at Bryn Mawr College, organized by Colby Gordon, Chess, and Fisher, which led to their special issue of the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* on Early Modern Trans Studies released in 2020.² This publication, the first special issue on this topic, joins the growing number of publications on transgender theory and Shakespeare/early modern studies.

The time is long overdue for transgender studies to be taken seriously by the Shakespearean and early modern studies community. I argue that rather than a fringe or marginal subfield, trans theory speaks to issues that are incredibly important to many disciplines and should be more prominent in Shakespeare and early modern studies. I agree with Susan Stryker that “transgender studies, far from being an inconsequentially narrow specialization . . . represents a significant and ongoing critical engagement with some of the most trenchant issues in contemporary humanities, social science, and biomedical research” (4). These issues “touch on the fundamental questions of human existence—into areas we rarely consider carefully,” such as “‘what makes a man a man, or a woman a woman?’ ‘How is my body related to my social role?’ ‘How do I know what my gender is?’” (7). These questions, of course, have always been and continue to be of utmost importance in approaches to gender and the body in Shakespearean performance, studies, and pedagogy.

1 This panel included presentations by Joubin, Fisher, Chess, Coby Gordon, and myself.

2 *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2019) was released in fall of 2020.

The use of trans theory, then, challenges scholars, practitioners, and teachers to explore these questions further, to reexamine them from all angles, to apply them to both past and present, early modern and presentist Shakespeare studies. And a feminist approach that is informed by trans theory offers ways to navigate and implement theory that enriches and broadens these studies, enabling ways to fight misogyny directed particularly at transfemininity. A transfeminist approach to Shakespeare in popular media and contemporary culture, then, provides an indispensable perspective in this emerging field, analyzing performances, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare in the context of popular media representations that react to and shape the perception of the trans community, thus having material effects on the lives of trans people.

Transgender Studies

Since transgender studies continues to evolve, its terminology is still under construction (see Joubin's Introduction to this issue, 5–7). I am using the terms “trans” and “transgender,” as many theorists do, as an all-encompassing term that denotes those who cross socially constructed gender norms, who depart from their assigned gender at birth in various ways for disparate reasons (see Stryker 2008, 1; Heyes 2013, 202).³ This broad definition of “transgender” can be useful for early modern scholars, for it allows one to examine multiple kinds of gender variance and “gender atypicality” that existed in historical contexts before the term was established, as well as in the present moment (Stryker 2008, 24). Although contemporary transgender studies did not surface until the early 1990s, as Alexa Alice Joubin discusses in her Introduction to this issue (11–14), occurrences and experiences that now fall under the category of “transgender” have been a “preoccupation of Western culture since Greek and Roman antiquity” (Stryker 2006, 13). The policing of what has been perceived as “monstrous” transgressive expressions of gender has gone on for centuries, which indicates that there have always been those who have sought to cross-over gender boundaries (Stryker 2006, 13). The current field seeks to “renarrate” this substantial “intellectual heritage,” as Stryker has noted (13). Early modern transgender studies takes on this historical project.

But, of course, transgender theory encompasses more than the examination of past phenomena; it is concerned with improving conditions and lives of transgender individuals and communities in the present day. Importantly, transgender activism is deeply engaged in matters of social justice. Trans studies works

3 This definition can be problematic, however, as Julia Serano and others have pointed out. Because it is such a broad term, “transgender” may elide differences between various kinds of gender identifications (see Serano 2007, 3). To signal these differences, some theorists use “transgender” to describe only those who identify with a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth, as opposed to those who identify as non-binary or genderqueer, who wish to carve out a new gendered identity, and/or who seek to resist the gender they were assigned at birth without adopting a binary masculine or feminine identity (Stryker 2008, 19). Conversely, Serano employs the term “transsexual” to denote only those who identify and experience a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth and “transgender” for other types of cross-gendered identities. Despite these issues with the term, many theorists use both the term “trans” and “transgender” in the broadest sense when necessary, which I will be doing in this article (except when referencing Serano, to respect her preference). On transgender studies terminology, see Stryker 2008, 1–29. For a helpful, regularly updated glossary, see Serano 2020.

to find new ways of understanding and representing gender, approaching the variations in the relationship between sex and gender from a non-negative or non-judgmental perspective, deeming these variations to be authentic. Transgender studies thus counters the diagnosis of pathology from the medical field and the condemnation of non-normative gender from some religious and political groups.

Transgender theory not only addresses the often-vexed relationships between sex and gender, biology and social construction, but also it goes beyond them. For Stryker (2006), it questions “why it should matter, ethically and morally, that people experience and express their gender in fundamentally different ways?” (3). The field unveils the ways in which institutions allow some particular acceptable options for personhood while excluding and eradicating others (3), and it asks what political action can be taken to deal with injustices and violence against those who transgress gender norms. Along with these concerns, transgender theory poses ethical questions, asking us to think through the importance of challenging gender norms; moreover, it advocates political action to correct injustice and prevent violence towards transgender people (10).

This aggression, arising out of anger, fear, and outrage that trans people disrupt gender norms and destabilize boundaries, often results in violent hate crimes. Sadly, these crimes have been on the rise in recent years. In the United States under the Trump administration, for instance, there were disproportionately more hostile anti-transgender legislation, rhetoric, policy, social media attacks, and negative media portrayals, as well as more frequent sexual violence against and murders of transgender individuals, in particular trans feminine people of color. The Human Rights Campaign (2020) reports that at least thirty-one transgender and gender non-conforming people were murdered as of October 6, 2020. The HRC notes that these numbers exceed any previous years since it began compiling these figures in 2013. And in the United Kingdom, transphobic hate crimes have increased dramatically, quadrupling from 2015 to 2020, increasing in the last couple of years by 25 percent. The BBC reports that victims of these hate crimes do not feel supported by law enforcement and have nowhere to turn for assistance (Chapple 2020). These are two among numerous instances globally that indicate the violent effects of transphobia (the hostility or anxiety directed towards those who are perceived as transgressing gender boundaries and undermining gender norms) and the dire need for activism to educate and fight for the rights and dignity of the trans community.

Transphobia in Popular Culture and Shakespeare

The assumptions that drive this violence are often echoed by and reinforced in popular culture—and therefore in performances, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare—in seemingly benign ways that nevertheless support the logic underlying transphobia. Shakespeare, in contemporary performance or appropriated in various media, does not exist in a vacuum or silo. Rather, Shakespeare is actively engaged and deeply embedded in popular culture, both drawing from and adding to the ways in which trans people

are represented. Consequently, when addressing how to approach Shakespeare from a trans perspective in scholarship, on stage, or in the classroom, it is imperative to analyze it in the context of popular culture, to examine how Shakespearean performances, adaptations, and appropriations replicate, comment on, or reject images of trans people that have circulated in the past decades and continue to do so today.

Frequently, transgender people are represented in popular culture to be artificial, false copies of the “real thing” or the authentic gender they attempt to simulate. Television shows, films, documentaries, and other media often foreground scenes or photos with news stories that feature trans individuals dressing and undressing, as well as rehearsing their walk, talk, and gestures to appear as their “new” gender, as if they are putting on an artificial gender with their costumes, accessories, and mimed behavior, as in the “transition” scenes in *The Danish Girl* (dir. Tom Hooper, Working Title Films, 2015). Serano points out that these scenes serve to frame trans people as if they simply portray a gender that they do not embody in reality (2013b, 229; 2013a, 116). In this sense, media and pop culture portrayals “reinforce cissexual ‘realness’ and transsexual ‘fakeness.’” They therefore demonstrate the prevalence of “cissexism,” in Serano’s terminology, in that they see trans identities only in terms of stereotypical cis ones — much like “heterosexism,” in which roles and behaviors in gay and lesbian relationships are falsely assumed to perpetuate traditional heterosexual ones. These depictions reiterate prevalent cissexual tropes that circulate in contemporary culture — that the transgender person is “closeted”; that they “pass” as the gender they pretend to be; and that, along the way, they “deceive” others about their actual, birth-assigned gender identity (2013a, 116).

These foregrounded depictions of transgender and non-gender conforming individuals and characters donning their apparel have persisted for decades and continue into the present moment. Notably, trans-masculine characters in popular culture — such as in the musical film and later play, *Victor Victoria* (1982); the more recent HBO television drama series based on the diaries of the historical person Anne Lister, *Gentleman Jack* (2019–2020); and the numerous screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s comedies — tend to be portrayed in a positive light, as strong-willed characters who outwit others and overcome obstacles to achieve their goals. Like many Shakespearean comic heroines, Victoria in *Victor Victoria*, a resourceful and talented woman in 1930s Paris, assumes a masculine identity because of immediate need (in this case, poverty), but nevertheless experiences life from a trans perspective; like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Victoria performs doubled drag by impersonating a man who impersonates a woman. In the film, much is made of her costuming and adoption of masculine looks and behavior, as well as that of other female impersonators — a move that, perhaps, is echoed in the 2018 musical film *A Star is Born* (discussed below).

Conversely, in *Gentleman Jack*, Anne Lister (Suranne Jones), a cross-dressed lesbian landowner in nineteenth century West Yorkshire, is depicted sympathetically as a resolute, heroic character who champions the rights of the downtrodden and paves the way toward awareness and acceptance of lesbian desire and queer gender identity. Nevertheless, the opening credits of this show play on the trope noted above: the

camera reveals her⁴ putting on her notorious masculine attire and accessories over her feminine undergarments, piece by piece—from close-up shots of her boots, buttons, laced up corset, pocket watch, jacket, gloves, to, finally, her top hat—in a jaunty fashion to a strong-beat, English country fiddle music, ending with an extreme close-up shot of her eye. In this way, the opening credits undercut this show’s overall progressive, pro-LGBTQ message by depicting Anne Lister’s gender identity as merely costume.

Not surprisingly, these kinds of scenes are standard in the productions and film adaptations of Shakespeare’s comedies that include cross-dressed heroines. Trevor Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* (1996), as well as adaptations *She’s the Man* (2005) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), among others, highlight scenes in which Viola is shown putting on/taking off masculine attire, including breast binding/bearing, and practicing how to walk and behave “like a man.” Interestingly, in *Shakespeare in Love*, Will (Joseph Fiennes) famously unbinds Viola de Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow) by holding one end of the cloth restricting her chest while she joyfully twirls around, leaving her finally bare-breasted once Will has removed the binding.

While similar gender reveal scenes involving transmasculine characters are often presented with disgust, *Shakespeare in Love* uses the dramatic device of undressing as trans revelation to fulfill the audiences’ voyeuristic desires (Joubin 2021) and to enforce a cis-heteronormative Viola. This film includes numerous shots of Viola’s breasts, which like this scene of undressing and others that draw from this trope, serve to shore up her cis identity by reassuring the audience that, although she has cross-dressed as Thomas Kent to be admitted onto the stage, she is, nonetheless, a “real” woman. Like these examples, with the exception of *Gentleman Jack*, Shakespeare’s heroines cross gender boundaries, at least initially, out of necessity, expediency, and self-protection (Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*) or power (Portia in *Merchant*)—and their trans experiences run the spectrum of shame, ambivalence, pleasure, and pride, among others. Although Viola suffers greatly from feeling that her gender expression is stifled in disguise, for instance, she seems to derive pleasure from acting in the world as Cesario and becoming “the man” to Olivia, as complicated as that situation may be; and once Viola assumes a transmasculine identity as Cesario, that identity remains intact throughout the entirety of the play, even when it is finally revealed at the end of the play that Cesario is actually Sebastian’s twin sister. Even more than Viola, Rosalind relishes her trans experience, especially in the layered expressions of gender performed in the wooing of Orlando as Ganymede who then plays the role of Orlando’s beloved Rosalind. Conversely, Portia feels pride in her cross-gender experience as the legal apprentice Balthazar, in her ability to manipulate rhetoric, dominate situations, and exert control over others to achieve her goals.

4 The character uses pronouns “she, her” to describe herself.

Transmisogyny in Popular Culture and Shakespeare

Trans feminine characters, on the other hand, do not enjoy such positive portrayals. Besides the many representations of transmasculine characters, only very few of which I have noted, the most negative representations focus primarily, although not exclusively, on trans feminine characters. These representations in popular culture extend beyond transphobia to a vehement hatred of femininity, which is then realized in the violent attacks and hate crimes directed at trans feminine people, especially those of color. These attacks are rooted not only in transphobia but also in misogyny, often intersected with racism, which remains prevalent in social structures in North America, the UK, and around the world—and within some kinds of feminism. Serano (2007) has termed this hate directed towards transfemininity in particular “trans-misogyny” or “transmisogyny” (14–15). As she insists, their rejection of a masculine identity poses a threat to masculine power, challenging male right to dominance and superiority; the idea that a man would forego masculine privilege to take on a vilified feminine identity flies in the face of dominant sexist ideology. In this sense, transmisogyny shares the same underlying misogynistic assumptions as traditional patriarchal sexism. It insists that trans feminine people are, at the core, inauthentic, deceptive, false, artificial (traits historically aligned with cultural notions of femininity)—in contrast to authentic, truthful, real, natural (traits that have been traditionally attributed to masculinity).

Like representations of transgender individuals and characters in general, trans feminine in particular focus on their dressing and rehearsing feminine behaviors. But the representations of trans feminine characters in contemporary media and popular culture often take it a step further, so that they appear as “hyperfeminine” and “hypersexed,” presented in images that exaggerate traditional female traits and characteristics to which they are seen to aspire. Moreover, representations also often reduce the trans feminine characters into fetishized body parts, such as “man-made vaginas” or “exaggerate[d] penises” in “tranny porn” (Serano 2007, 16). Interestingly, this treatment of them occurs, in obvious or sometimes in subtle fashion, even when the source appears to be pro-trans in its surface narrative.

These representations of transfemininity in media and popular culture often fall into two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or “pathetic transsexual” (Serano 2013b, 226–31). In the former archetype, they are depicted as feminine characters who can successfully pass as “real” women until their secret is revealed, as in films such as those discussed by Serano (2007): *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *The Crying Game* (1992), and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), among others (36–38). The latter, the “pathetic transsexual,” is characterized by her failure to look and act like a “real” woman, often depicted as a male desperately attempting to appear feminine while claiming his “true” identity is female—only to evoke scorn and ridicule. The “pathetic” trans character typically appears for comic effect. Serano (2007) cites *The World According to Garp* (1982), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), and *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (1998) as some of many examples (38–41).

Representations in popular culture that feature trans feminine (“trans” used in a broad sense) characters may also play on these two archetypes, even though the trans characters would not be considered “transsexual” in Serano’s definition. Examples include the comedy films *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982), the NBC television show *Bosom Buddies* (1982–84), as well as others. Most of these examples foreground the scenes described above, in which the characters are shown dressing or undressing and practicing mannerisms of their assumed gender. “Buddy cross-dressing” comedies like these highlight scenes of the male lead(s) dressing up, wearing stockings, learning to walk in heels, shopping for and accessorizing outfits, applying makeup, and so on. These comic scenes serve to reinforce the viewer’s awareness that these characters are “really” men, thereby distancing them from being too closely aligned with femininity. The “buddy scenes” that include these moments, as well as other scenes that focus on the bonding between the buddy characters—Jack Lemmon (Jerry [Gerald]/Daphne) and Tony Curtis (Joe/Josephine/ Shell Oil Junior) in *Some Like It Hot*; Dustin Hoffman (Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels) and Bill Murray (Jeff) in *Tootsie*; Tom Hanks (Kip Wilson/Buffy) and Peter Scolari (Henry Desmond/Hildegard) in *Bosom Buddies*—reaffirm the trans characters’ “true” masculinity and heterosexuality. These scenes thus serve to neutralize or balance out these narratives’ focus on the characters’ lives as women. Despite this effort to undercut the effects of these characters’ trans experiences, some examples offer some more serious moments of reflection (*Tootsie*), while others push gender and sexuality boundaries to the limit (*Some Like It Hot*).

Overall, however, these representations of transfemininity in popular culture provide examples of Serano’s “deceptive” archetype: one who passes by successfully fooling others with a false identity as a woman, which the character takes on either by choice or out of necessity. Since the characters pass within the world of the film or show until they reveal their secret, they elude ridicule within its narrative. Externally, however, the effect is quite different. Costumed and shot in ways that emphasize the “authentic” male identity of the actors playing the roles, the characters fail to pass entirely for the viewer. From the spectator’s point of view, the characters are shown to appear obviously masculine underneath their feminine garments, despite their exaggerated efforts at “putting on” an authentic woman’s appearance. And that failure, along with the sexist notion that any man would willingly want to become a woman, becomes the misogynistic joke that propels the film or show’s comedy, as with Serano’s archetype of the “pathetic transsexual.”

In this way, these instances in popular culture resemble that of Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, who is both the brunt of a joke for other characters within the play and also the audience outside of it because of his failure to “pass” when he appears disguised as an old woman, the Witch of Brainford (4. 2). Falstaff’s inability to hide his beard and other masculine signifiers makes him a target of aggression and malicious humor. This running comic gag carries with it troubling resonances of recent violence against trans people, particularly trans feminine, when Ford beats him out the door. This connection becomes especially apparent in performance. As Kemp (2019) puts it, “As a joke, the gag relies on the idea that the trans feminine character is ‘really’ a man and a benefactor of traditionally masculine strength (often

supernaturally so)” (275). They point out a few instances in which this same trope is used in popular media, showing its persistence in contemporary culture and noting that “humor in these scenes relies on an audience belief in the trans feminine body’s ability to withstand (and perhaps deserve) extreme violence” (Kemp 2019, 275).⁵ Playing on this trope, the scene when Falstaff is bated to appear in buck’s horns (5.5) is typically staged for laughs, making Falstaff a figure of mockery and derision for audiences (see Chess 2016, 1–2). When staged this way, Falstaff in this scene becomes a composite of both archetypes—the “deceptive” and “pathetic” trans figure—because he had attempted to pass as a woman but failed to pull it off, and he was now being punished for that transgression.

The deceptive/pathetic trans archetype surfaces comically in *Shakespeare in Love* as well when Will adopts a trans feminine identity to accompany Viola as her country cousin, Miss Wilhelmina. A more serious version of this version is Antony and Cleopatra’s trans role-playing in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.5). The Romans view their role-play as shameful evidence of his unmanly behavior and Cleopatra’s monstrous usurpation of male authority, in contrast to Egyptians, who view it positively as erotic pleasure found in open gender expression and variant sexuality.

In recent years, this composite archetype has been challenged, along with transmisogyny, in culture and feminisms. The archetype is developed more seriously, sympathetically, and less stereotypically through the lead character, Maura Pfefferman (albeit played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor), in Joey Soloway’s Amazon Prime show *Transparent* (2014–2015), a show that critiques transmisogyny in multiple ways. In this series, the lead character struggles against this archetype of the failed, the pathetic trans feminine figure, fighting for respect and recognition of her gender expression.

Other times, however, the archetype may appear in more modified or subdued versions, along with a more complicated relationship to transmisogyny. Some contemporary films, shows, or other media in popular culture may incorporate scenes that play into transmisogyny, but in a subtler fashion, even in those that appear to be pro-LGBTQ in their surface or dominant narrative, much like the opening of *Gentleman Jack*, noted above. For instance, the 2018 film *A Star is Born* includes a variation on the trope of the trans figure dressing/undressing in a key scene. The two lead characters, Ally (Lady Gaga) and rock star Jack (Bradley Cooper), meet each other at a drag show in which Ally appears as a drag queen in doubled drag, the only ciswoman who is allowed to perform at the club. Ally and Jack converse for the first time in the dressing room following Ally’s performance, where she is surrounded by her fellow drag artists. As the rock star and Ally chat, she slowly strips off her hyperfeminine drag makeup, including false eyebrows, to Jack’s amazement. Seated at her dressing table, facing her mirror, Ally transforms from the exaggerated version of an

5 Kemp goes on to describe the differences in cross-gender productions that feature a female actor as Falstaff who appears then in doubled drag (an instance of “backpassing” in trans terminology). For Kemp, the transphobic scene noted above may, in these instances, provide a “performative awareness of that transphobic violence” (2019, 276).

Edith Piaf-type cabaret singer, her drag persona, into a “natural style” look (in contrast to the actual persona of actor/singer Lady Gaga herself, who often appears in flamboyant and glamorous attire and makeup).

The scene effectively designates Ally as the “real” woman, sharply contrasting her image to that of the others in her midst. On this representational level, then, the film posits a notion of what it means to be a woman—who is the true female, as opposed to who is not. In contrast with the other drag performers, who consciously exaggerate femininity for dramatic and comic effect on and off stage in the dressing room (as when they ask rock star Jack to sign their prosthetic breasts, for instance), Ally is highlighted as an example of a truly “authentic” and “natural” woman, as opposed to the “false,” “artificial” drag queens. Along with this treatment of Ally, *A Star is Born* thus employs the archetype of the “pathetic transsexual” in its depiction of the drag performers, although only briefly, reiterating transmisogyny that continues to be prevalent in contemporary culture and in some strands of feminism.

Transmisogyny and Feminisms

Although contemporary transgender studies grew out of third-wave feminism and, therefore, shares the position that the sex a person is assigned at birth need not necessarily align with or determine their social gender, the relationship between trans studies and some kinds of feminism has been and continues to be fraught with conflict. This conflict has a complex history. Anti-transgender feminist positions first became widespread in the extremely influential 1979 book by second-wave feminist Janice Raymond, entitled *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She Male*. In her book, Raymond argues that transsexual women are, in effect, only men who appropriate patriarchy’s view of womanhood, thereby exemplifying a kind of “false consciousness” in artificially taking on a feminine appearance (Raymond 1979).⁶ Raymond and others who took similar positions came to be known as TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists).⁷ Countering Raymond’s stance, Sandy Stone initiated the transgender movement in 1991 with the highly influential, landmark essay “The Empire Strikes Back: The Posttranssexual Manifesto,” which points out the flaws in Raymond’s argument and calls for a new field to combat this anti-transgender sentiment in feminism (Stone 1991; see also Stryker and Bettcher 2016, 10).

Nevertheless, anti-transgender feminists today still echo Raymond’s seventies’ theory. Like Raymond, they insist that trans feminine people are inauthentic, that they are biologically—and therefore immutably

6 For more on Raymond’s views and their importance in historical context, see Stryker 2006, 4; Hines 2019, 146; Serano 2013b, 232, and 2013a, 119.

7 This term “TERF” is often seen as an insult, even though it apparently was not so initially when it emerged in a blog in 2008 (Hines 2019, 147). To counter it, anti-transgender feminists have adopted the term “gender critical,” but that term is highly problematic because it implies that trans people and activists are somehow “gender uncritical” (Ahmed 2016, 30). Since I, like Lori Watson and others, want to initiate productive dialogue amongst feminists to effect positive change, I will avoid using the term TERF (see Watson 2016, 252), but neither will I employ the term “gender critical” for the reason stated above. Instead, I will be using the terms “anti-transgender feminist” and “trans-exclusionary feminist” in this article.

—male because of their chromosomal makeup, based on traditional notions about biological sex that reduce the spectrum and complexity of biological sex into the binary of male/female. Alongside this view, anti-transgender feminists claim that women who are trans feminine are socially not “real women” because they were not raised as women and do not share their experiences, thereby disparaging their experiences and gender identification. Both positions, which are typically articulated together, exemplify attempts to define and control gender and bodies.

This policing of gender and bodies is deeply ingrained in these strands of feminism, not exclusively in response to trans activism. Ironically, even though anti-transgender feminists claim to fight patriarchy, they participate equally in the efforts to restrict the boundaries of gender and to regulate others’ bodies that do not comply with their outdated notions of sex and gender. In the 1990s, I wrote about the misogyny embedded in some feminisms and how misogyny, as well as divergent feminisms, could be addressed in the classroom. I discussed the image of the feminist circulating in contemporary media at the time, which of course conflicted with that of third-wave and poststructural feminists, as one who “condemns pornography, censures heterosexual desire, and prohibits any traditionally ‘feminine’ pleasure; who lacks both a sense of humor and an open mind; and who retreats into an ascetic existence to avoid the world she scorns” (Starks 1994, 111).

This perceived regulation of genders and bodies had its origins in the feminist views that were, at that time, aligning against the emerging transgender movement. As a heteroqueer ciswoman, trans ally, and trans-feminist, I have always felt the need to speak out about this misogyny ingrained in these groups, and especially now that it has manifested in transmisogyny. This transmisogyny, often inflected with racism, has and continues to propel the discrimination and murders of trans feminine people, especially those of color.

In spite of—or, rather, because of—political and social gains that trans people have achieved in recent years, this anti-transgender rhetoric from these feminists, aimed primarily at those who are trans feminine, has increased and has continued to do so (see Hines 2019, 149). In part, this backlash has arisen because trans theory challenges second-wave feminists’ notion of “woman” as a monolithic entity. This central concept of the woman’s movement, called into question by third-wave feminists, formulated the category of “woman” based on white, middle-class women, not taking into account diversity of race, class, or ethnicity.

Certain radical feminist groups and also some mainstream, vocal second-wave feminists have promoted and continue to promote this anti-trans position, which seeks to exclude, shame, bash, and erase trans feminine people—at women’s festivals, university campuses, Pride events (particularly Pride London 2008 and 2018, when I was there), in popular culture, and on social media (see Stryker 2008, 5; Hines 2019, 150–51). Often, their message hinges on the unsubstantiated fear that those who are trans feminine constitute a threat to ciswomen’s well-being, simply because they are trans, have a penis, or somehow generate a disruptive “male energy.” Sadly, these false accusations against them have resulted in violence directed at

them. As Sara Ahmed points out, “to give an account of trans people as causing violence (by virtue of being trans) is to cause violence against trans people” (26).

This misogyny, now erupting as transmisogyny, has continued to escalate. The media backlash after the release of the 2015 issue of *Vanity Fair* featuring a photo of Caitlin Jenner on the cover, initiated by Elinor Burkett in her *New York Times* op ed, along with the many comments applauding her attacks on Jenner on social media, serves as just one example of this transmisogyny (see Steinberg 2015). Although Burkett claims that she is not a trans-exclusionary radical feminist or TERF (Burkett 2015), she basically restates the arguments from Raymond’s book. Two prominent authors and public figures, Germain Greer and J. K. Rowling, have circulated similar views. In her writing and public speeches, Greer has repeatedly accused trans women (whom she claims are men because they lack vaginas) of attempting to penetrate spaces that belong to women. Greer, along with other public figures in the UK, has perpetuated these views over the past couple of decades (Hines, 2019, 152–53).

Author Rowling, the most high-profile figure to echo these sentiments, has circulated tweets that have targeted trans women. In them, she has also promoted the store Wild Womyn Workshop (<https://wild-womynworkshop.com/>), which sells anti-trans merchandise, such as buttons that read “Trans women are Men,” “Woman is not a costume” (with an image of a uterus), and “Transmen are My Sisters,” among many other items that promote anti-trans views.⁸ Although she has claimed to be an ally of the trans community, Rowling nevertheless maintains that trans women are not “real” women. After criticizing an op ed that used the phrase “people who menstruate” for using the word “people” instead of “women,” Rowling tweeted the following:

If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth. The idea that women like me, who’ve been empathetic to trans people for decades, feeling kinship because they’re vulnerable in the same way as women — i.e., to male violence — ‘hate’ trans people because they think sex is real and has lived consequences — is a nonsense.⁹ (Rowling 2020; see Gardner 2020)

Rowling’s assumption here, that trans people “erase . . . the concept of sex,” misrepresents the field of transgender studies which, rather than “erasing” sex, seeks instead to more fully understand it through more informed and nuanced perspectives from contemporary biology and other fields that have moved beyond the binary male/female, in which much feminism is still grounded, to a more complex spectrum of sexes.

8 Here is a link to the “Gender Critical” merchandise on their website, last accessed October 16, 2020: <https://wildwomynworkshop.com/category-product/gender-critical/page/5/> <https://www.insider.com/jk-rowling-terf-online-store-selling-anti-trans-merch-2020-9>

9 For a compilation of Rowling’s tweets and responses to them, see Gardner 2020.

Ironically, it is this position held by Rowling and some other feminists on the concept of “sex,” not that held by the trans community, that remains a major part of the problem. Because many feminisms have bracketed off new approaches in biological research and trans theory, even while they advocate the view that a woman’s identity is based on female body parts (uterus, vagina), they ignore contemporary advances made concerning sex in scientific and other fields. This information gap opens up the possibility of misinformation and misunderstanding between feminism and transgender theorists, as well as within branches of feminism itself. Because of this problem and other issues, the anti-transgender feminists continue to lash out in various publications, posts on social media, and representations in popular culture.

Feminists who counter anti-transgender views like Rowling’s tend to base their arguments on the perceived differences between this radical feminism and other kinds of feminism, thereby attempting to distinguish and separate anti-transgender feminists from those who are trans allies. Judith Butler has used this strategy in her response to comments by Rowling and others (Ferber 2020). Mainly, opponents of anti-transgender feminists charge them with “essentialism” because of their belief in biological sex—the material body, often signaled in parts “vagina,” “uterus,” “penis”—as a determinant of one’s “sex.”

Serano offers an alternative perspective in her feminist theory, however, pointing out what different types of feminism, both pro- and anti-transgender, have in common, rather than what they do not. She argues that, basically, there are two main branches of feminists: 1) social constructionists, who claim that there is no exact or unmodified correlation between one’s biological sex and socially constructed gender, to which Serano and many trans theorists belong; and 2) gender artifactualists, who disregard or intentionally overlook the “possibility that biology and biological variation” also factor in “constraining or shaping” one’s gender. Serano then separates the second category, gender artifactualists, into two camps. In the first, “sex” (in the sex/gender binary) has only a minimal to no influence in gender; in the second, “sex” is just as constructed as gender, so “gender is performance” or “gender is just a construct” (2013a, 117–18).

Serano argues that both anti-transgender feminists and those that oppose them, including poststructuralists, fall into the category of “gender artifactualists” because they both, in one way or another, limit forces other than social ones in the construction of gender (2013a, 119). Although anti-transgender feminists ground their claim that trans women are not “real women” because they lack chromosomal makeup or necessary body parts in biology, their view of biological sex itself is reductive and outdated, lacking the nuance of contemporary biology. The focus of their radical feminist thought and research, like that of other artifactualists, has remained solely on social gender, not on other fields of research, so they lag behind in their consideration of new ways to consider biological sexes.

Much good has come out of this emphasis on social gender, Serano acknowledges, for the positions taken by gender artifactualists have been used to support and fight for radical change, confront traditional notions of “biological determinism,” and enable a model of gender that allows for revolutionary change.

Nevertheless, problems have emerged, especially in relation to trans people, because the gender artifactualist's view "automatically forecloses any possibility that there might be non-social or intrinsic factors that influence or predispose one to cross-gender identification" (2013a, 119).

The gender artifactualists' dismissal of other factors in the construction of gender, as well as their underlying belief in a traditional binary gender system (M/F), often leads to the idea that trans identities are false, that trans people misconstrue their own gender to be material or "real" as opposed to "only a construct." So, for some gender artifactualists, trans people's claims to their own authentic gender identities belie a "false consciousness" that supports the societal system of gender oppression.¹⁰ Consequently, as Serano explains, many gender artifactualists from either camp disregard the self-proclaimed experiences and identities of many transgender individuals, discounting "the transsexual's claims of deep, profound, subconscious self-understanding of which sex we belong to" (2013a, 119).

To grapple with this situation, Serano proposes a "holistic" feminist approach, one that is multidisciplinary, drawing from various fields of study to offer "a framework for challenging *all* forms of sexism and marginalization," not excluding members of the trans or other communities. Holistic feminism would move beyond the old "nature/nurture" debate, which fails to provide a comprehensive picture of sex or gender, to examine how "biology, culture, and environment all interact in an unfathomably complex manner to generate the human diversity that we see all around us" (2013a, 6). She points out that the only way to see beyond our own subjective viewpoint so that we can acknowledge and comprehend these "complex phenomena" is through a holistic, multi-faceted feminism. This holistic feminism may help us to counter the persistent trend of transphobia and transmisogyny in our culture, especially in feminist rhetoric and action. It is important for both trans and cis people, especially feminists, to speak out against it and to effect change by fostering resilient coalitions between feminism and transgender studies, strengthening existing transfeminisms, educating ourselves and others, and making advances toward true gender equality.

Besides Serano's more recent call for a holistic approach in feminism, other movements—with which her approach aligns—have been instrumental in working toward these goals for some time. Transgender feminism or "transfeminism," a term first coined in 1992 by US activists Diana Courvant and Emi Koyama and further developed by Anne Enke (2013) in *Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (Stryker and Bettcher 2016, 11), is a "'third wave' feminist sensibility that focuses on the personal empowerment of women and girls, embraced in an expansive way that includes trans women and girls' sex positivity" (Stryker and Bettcher 2006, 11; also see Joubin's "Shakespearean Performance through a Trans Lens" in this issue, 76). As a movement, transfeminism is crucial in efforts to save lives, overturn violent masculinities, and improve the treatment of trans feminine people, both locally and globally. In this sense, as Ahmed has rightfully pointed out, "Transfeminism is a form of diversity work" (31), an intersectional

10 See Serano 2013a, 120. Here she lists examples of constructionist and poststructuralist feminists who voice these views, including Marjorie Garber.

movement that involves disability studies, critical race studies, and other social justice fields that fight antisemitism, xenophobia, and other forms of hate and discrimination.

Transgender Studies in Shakespeare Studies and Practice

Transfeminism can greatly benefit our practices as Shakespeare and early modern literature scholars, teachers, and theater practitioners, enabling us to conduct this diversity work and effect positive change. In terms of scholarship, early modern trans studies is engaged with the important historical work of uncovering a trans past that speaks to our present cultural moment and political activism. Complementing these efforts, trans studies in Shakespearean performance, adaptation, and appropriation, as evidenced in this special issue, explores the issues surrounding representations of gender on stage, in film, and in other popular media. This work also examines trans issues in supporting theatrical and cinematic institutions, apparatuses, outreach, and publicity.¹¹

Of course, Shakespeare's plays and poems, and early modern literature in general, are steeped in misogyny, whether or not one interprets the texts as reiterating or critiquing it. And, sometimes unconsciously, this misogyny surfaces as transmisogyny in Shakespearean performances on stage, screen, and other media. In terms of theatrical productions, films, and adaptations, it is not only crucial that we challenge traditional gender casting, but also that we advocate gender-conscious and sensitive casting that is informed by trans theory and community outreach. That way, we deeply consider *how* we stage or film Shakespeare, so that we avoid unwittingly creating productions that are steeped in transmisogyny, even when parts are played by cross-gendered casts.

In other scholarly subfields of Shakespeare studies, especially feminism and queer theory, trans studies can question and challenge normalizing or monolithic views on gender that may not always be acknowledged or articulated. For instance, the seemingly benign, commonplace notion in both criticism and performance that the transmasculine transition of Shakespeare's comic heroines (as discussed above) is liberating, as opposed to that of trans feminine characters (with transmasculine characters championed as "strong" and "active" and trans feminine characters as "weak" or "shameful") is highly problematic. Although interpreting the trans expressions of these heroines as liberatory may be seen as pro-trans, it can also set up a one-way street. The underlying assumption—that it is praiseworthy to embody masculinity, but discreditable to embody femininity—reiterates and transmits the transmisogyny that is deeply implicated in transphobia worldwide.

Moving from scholarship and performance to the classroom, trans studies calls into question the transphobia and transmisogyny that, unfortunately, often remain entrenched in the academy and in our classrooms.

11 On theatrical institutions, staging, and trans awareness, see Kemp 2019, 266–70.

In order for these efforts to succeed, however, academic institutions need to provide support through an infrastructure transformation that is informed by transfeminism and other intersectional forms of diversity. As Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura have noted, positive change in higher education cannot be successful until it is “accompanied by infrastructural change: trans-friendly dorms, gender neutral bathrooms, the ability to change one’s name and gender markers in databases, a faculty and staff who—at minimum—are literate about the issues facing transgender and gender non-conforming students” (6–7). And, since trans feminine students are far less likely to have the opportunity to continue on in higher education, it is important that they find a hospitable atmosphere at learning institutions (7).

At the classroom level, a transfeminist pedagogical approach engages students through the questions, insights, and practices of trans studies. This approach can enrich the way we teach literature in general and Shakespeare or early modern drama in particular. When readings and discussions are informed by trans theory in concert with non-exclusionary feminism and the diversity work mentioned above, students not only examine texts from multiple perspectives, some that they have not encountered in earlier coursework, but also they examine issues involving gender and other intersecting matters that have shaped how the plays have been performed and received in early modern, modern, and contemporary contexts.

Focusing on using transfeminist approaches in teaching early modern women writers, for instance, Chess offers suggestions to push against the notion that trans theory is incompatible with feminism to “broaden the canon of queer and feminist early modern texts” and to teach them “in ways that are trans-informed and trans-inclusive” that “do not alienate trans, non-binary, and genderqueer students and colleagues” (2021, 41). She provides seven extremely helpful strategies for a pedagogy informed by transfeminism. Even though these strategies deal primarily with teaching early modern women writers, many of them would be applicable in teaching Shakespeare in contemporary contexts, such as the following: “Identify and Teach Textual Moments about All Kinds of Genders”; “Use the Tools of Trans Studies”; “Get Humble and Flexible with Language and Terminology”; “Make Space for (and Name) Trans Histories”; “Teach from a Place of ‘Yes, And’”—among others (43– 49). When teaching trans histories, for example, one can use early modern trans studies to explore histories of the boy actors who expressed trans feminine gender on stage and off. This kind of examination can help students to navigate early modern notions of gender and, in Chess’s words, “normalize the idea that ways of understanding and interpreting sex, gender, and sexuality always have been and always will be invented and reinvented” (2021, 47).¹²

Besides using these strategies, it is important to keep in mind and avoid some pitfalls that can occur, even when trans approaches are used with the best of intentions. For instance, Kemp has argued that teaching Shakespeare’s heroines in “pants” as if they are examples of trans people is misguided because of the gaping disparity between the trans experiences of these characters and the lives of and challenges faced by actual

12 For a helpful resource, see Chess 2016.

trans people in our contemporary moment. To counter this problem, Kemp (2020) advocates pairing these texts with readings by and about trans people and assigning students questions that help them navigate the terrain of these differences; or teaching a character like Hamlet, rather than an obvious one like Viola, as exhibiting trans elements.

Using these strategies and suggestions in implementing a transfeminist approach to teaching Shakespeare in modern and contemporary contexts, an instructor may use classroom readings and assignments that focus on trans and non-exclusionary feminist issues in performance and adaptation. These readings and assignments thus provide students the opportunity to think through decisions made by artistic directors, production companies, directors, and actors to determine what difference these decisions make to audiences and cultures surrounding their productions (see Joubin and Starks 2021, 25–28).

One exercise might be to show some of the popular culture examples described above, alongside assigned readings, followed with corresponding Shakespeare films or filmed stage productions. Often a popular culture example can provide students a way in, so that when they then turn to the Shakespearean production, they can see that many of the same pressures, alternatives, and choices exist. Students could then engage with both the popular media and Shakespeare examples, relating them to assigned readings on trans theory. Afterwards, they could apply the theory themselves in an activity in which they create their own version of a Shakespeare play.

In this activity, students could determine how, in what ways, and with what actors, set, staging, or filming choices they would use in their own production and why. In this discussion, students would need to consider how their choices could affect their entire imagined production and how they might be received by audiences. Activities could vary depending on whether or not the class meets face-to-face or online: in the former, students in groups could determine how a scene would be performed on stage and then demonstrate it for the class; in the latter, students could map out in writing and/or create a short video demonstrating their decisions. Either way, students would be actively involved in the production decision-making process, so they would have to consider and take into account the effects their productions may have on audiences and surrounding communities (see Joubin and Starks 2021, 25–28).

Although this exercise focuses primarily on Shakespeare's trans characters, it requires that students examine how these characters are represented *as* characters, with a view toward how those representations— as well as those in film, television, and other media— shape cultural perceptions and attitudes towards trans people. As illustrated by this example, a transfeminist-informed classroom would shape not just *what* but *how* the subject is taught, so that students actively engage and learn from each other as well as the instructor to incorporate insights, challenges, and questions from trans theory to make classrooms more active and engaging.

I am advocating a thorough use of this diversity work in pedagogical practice, not an empty or counter-productive gesture toward transgender activism amid an unchanged teaching approach, as in a one-size-fits-all imposition of gender-neutral pronouns in the classroom. The imposition of gender-neutral pronouns, which some may see as a “pro-trans” gesture, may be counterproductive because it may make trans students, especially those who have struggled to achieve their gender identity, extremely uncomfortable, feeling as if others fail to accept their gender identity. As Stryker (2008) has explained, “Some transgender people — often those who have worked very hard to attain a gender status other than the one assigned to them at birth — take offense when gender-neutral pronouns, rather than the appropriate gendered ones, are applied to them because they perceive this usage as a way that others fail to acknowledge their attained gender” (22). As instructors, we need to be sensitive to students’ pronoun use and other preferences or needs without making them feel “outed” or forced to represent the entire trans community for the class.

In Shakespeare and early modern drama courses, as well as in that of other literature and humanities subjects, we can implement a pedagogy informed by a robust transfeminism and truly effect change at the local as well as global, personal and institutional levels. As Shakespeareans and early modern scholars, theater practitioners, and educators, we can identify and acknowledge the ways that transphobia and transmisogyny creep into our own institutions in general and Shakespeare/early modern studies in particular — in our scholarship, performance, and teaching. That way, we can work toward positive change through our outreach to others both inside and outside of academia.

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