

The Shakespeare Experiment: A Seduction in the form of an Essay

by Sky Gilbert

“I was on the floor with laughter. If you held a gun to my head and forced me to justify myself, I would say there’s something inherently edgy in the ideal of male on male sex – the primacy of desire, it’s genetic futility – and anything that defrays that tension can be funny.”

Ian Brown on Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Bruno*, in *The Globe and Mail*, 2009

"I don't think of myself as gay. That doesn't mean that I'm not gay. I just don't define myself by my sexuality.”

Tom Ford on his film *A Single Man*, in *The Advocate*, 2009

In theatre programs at academic institutions, there is much talk of theory and practice. My experience is that educational experiences in which theory and practice are actually combined are few and far between. Often there is a lot of practice and almost no theory, or a lot of theory and almost no practice. One of the problems with theoretical practice is that art and science are not the same. Jacob Bronowski asserts in *Science and Human Values* that scientists and artists share the same creative impulse. He suggests, for instance that the image of the woman who resembles her pet in DaVinci’s *Lady with Stroat* is as much a theory of evolution as Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. I would contend that art inspires us and goads thought, even though it may not prove anything, at least not the way scientists insist that their experiments do. The discoveries we made in *The Shakespeare Experiment* were not strictly scientific. This was not a completely controlled situation, in which the results were proven (and perhaps could be re-proven) without a shadow of a doubt. However, *The Shakespeare Experiment* has stirred me to think more deeply about issues around gender and performance, and to ponder implications of theory and poststructuralism, that are, I think, complex and important.

The Shakespeare Experiment was a practical and theoretical project involving research into constructs of masculinity and femininity and the cultural conditions of Shakespearean production in performance, presented each summer from 2008 to 2010, in Toronto. Each year one scene by Shakespeare was performed in three different ways with differently gendered actors in the same key roles in each performance. In one version of

the scene the female roles were played by female actors, in another the same roles were played by male university student actors, and in the third version the roles were played by male university student actors executing drag performances. The first year (August 23 and 24, 2008) we presented the final scene from *As You Like It*, the second year (August 29 and 30, 2009) we presented the final scene from *A Winter's Tale*, and the third year (2010) we presented the final scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*. All were performed at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. Student actors from the University of Guelph performed in plays opposite professional actors, directed by professional directors and designed by a professional designer. The performances were followed by an audience survey. Graduate student research assistants pursued academic research, provided undergraduates with information, and helped set up and analyze the audience surveys. The Shakespeare Experiment, having recently completed the third year of a three-year SSHRC funded project, sold out its 200 seats each year.

There were three primary goals for The Shakespeare Experiment. The first was to try and replicate (as accurately as possible) the experience of an Early Modern theatergoer in the 16th century watching a play in which boys play the women's roles. The second purpose was to discover how contemporary theatre-goers understand cross-dressing in the theatre. Was it a function of art, or a function of sexuality, or both? The third purpose was to explore the possibility of 'queering' Shakespeare's work. Queering the work, means, in this case, exploring whether Shakespeare's works fit comfortably in a queer context. If Shakespeare's characters are played in the context of gay desire and romance (as we understand them today) does this fit, or is it an inappropriate imposition?

As a SSHRC funded Research Creation Grant in association with the University of Guelph, we were mandated to provide training for undergraduate student actors, stage managers, designers, dramaturgs and directors as theatre professionals, and also to provide training for graduate students as researchers and teachers. Thus, each year we hired as many student actors as we could afford. The undergraduate students were paid \$10 an hour and the graduate students were paid \$20 an hour. The student actors were mentored by professional actors (paid at Equity rates) at a ratio of approximately two students to each professional actor mentor. The professional actors took minor roles in the scenes, so their mentoring involved not only advising the young actors at key points

in rehearsal and leading workshops, but also performing alongside them in small parts. The first year, The Shakespeare Experiment lasted for two weeks, and culminated in two performances with 27 students involved. Eighteen of the students were actors and the rest were either graduate students or undergraduates involved as stage managers or design assistants. The second year was the most ambitious rehearsal and performance period, with a duration of three weeks, culminating in three performances, and with a total of 28 students involved. Mainly due to budgetary concerns, the final year was vastly scaled down, with one week of rehearsal culminating in one performance. There were a total of 9 undergraduate actors involved but no design, stage management students or graduate students. The student-training component of the project was completely integrated into the process. Acting students not only had actor mentors working beside them, but design students assisted professional designers and stage management students worked with a professional stage manager each year. For the first two years of The Shakespeare Experiment, Sherri Hay was the set and costume designer and student mentor. The three professional directors: Moynan King, Edward Roy and myself, were the primary resource persons envisioning the Shakespeare scenes.

In addition to the training that occurred through rehearsing and performing the scenes, there were also formal workshops for the first two years. The first summer, the students attended separate workshops led by their own directors and in the second year (in response to student demands), the workshops led by each director were open to all students. The first year Moynan and Keith Cole led tap dancing workshops and the second year Moynan worked with students on creating theatrical 'tableau.' Edward and Salvatore Antonio led workshops in rhetorical gesture both years. I led workshops in 'drag' performance in year one and two, for both young men and young women, assisted by Keith Cole, David Tomlinson and Ryan Kelly. The content of the workshops was related to each director's approach.

Each year the three professional directors approached their new scenes in fundamentally the same way as they had the year before. Moynan's job was to employ a 'straight' 'Stratfordesque' approach to Shakespeare. She was not allowed to cross-cast or to play with gender (other than in ways that were dictated by the script, for example when Rosalind cross-dressed as a boy). This was the only imposition put on Moynan's work.

As Moynan is a radical lesbian feminist, these rules were somewhat restrictive for her. Nevertheless, she construed fascinating methods of making her work radical. The purpose of these restrictions was to give the audience (and ourselves) – in terms of sexuality and gender, at least, – a template or ‘norm’ of a modern Shakespeare performance from which to view the historical version (that Edward directed) and the ‘queer’ version (that I directed).

Moynan’s productions involved the most elaborate sets, as well as choreographed movement: a tap dancing sequence (in the first summer) and tableaux (in the second and third summer). Though restricted in terms of gender and sexuality, Moynan was free, as are the directors at Stratford (Ontario), to set her pieces in whatever time period she wished, and to create surprising visual effects which is something one often finds in a Stratford production that is praised for taking ‘risks.’ Moynan’s fascination with tableaux has a historical basis and is related to feminist issues. In some western cultures, at certain points in history, women were restricted in terms of their appearance on stage. They were allowed to be part of performances (and even to appear nude) only if they appeared in a still, mute ‘tableau’. During the second and third summers, Moynan focused on tableau as a central technique for presenting her scenes. The tableau image was particularly apt for Hermoine’s statue in *The Winter’s Tale* whose movement was tableau-like, since it was sometimes very still. Moynan also employed the actors who played the ‘three gentleman’ as trees, and later to play passages and gates for the actors to walk through. In the third year, for *Antony and Cleopatra*, Moynan made reference to Charcot’s famous photograph’s of hysterical women during the opening sequence when the actors entered and formed a series of quickly changing still pictures.

Moynan’s scenes were always set in an historical period that was neither the present, nor the Early Modern period. As in a typical Stratford production her mise-en-scene demanded that we as an audience think conceptually: that is to try and interpret her unique and anachronistic interpretations, which – although they had a feminist perspective – did not fundamentally challenge the audience’s conceptions of gender or sexuality. For instance, in her version of the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* the image of Hermoine was one of a strong feminist icon (on a futurist set), and Moynan’s Cleopatra was a persecuted woman in a 1950s mental institution. Both interpretations engaged

feminist issues but neither interpretation presented romantic or sexual relations between same sex characters. Moynan's approach resulted in beautiful and thoughtful interpretations of Shakespeare that were surprisingly challenging, considering the fact she was restricted from cross-casting. For many audience members, her scenes were the favorite ones. I suspect that this not only had to do with Moynan's skill as a director, but the fact that the scenes were very much what the audience was used to seeing at Stratford, except with a more feminist bent.



PHOTOGRAPHER: Blair Kay
Wes Berger, Marie Hale, Patricia Huston, Blair Kay, Rob Krazsewski , Payge Mildebrath, Clinton Walker, Michael Young, Tom Bates, Keith Cole, Jeffrey Aarles, Lydia Zemaitis

The other two directorial approaches were juxtaposed against Moynan's fascinating but somewhat typical interpretations (which were typical only because we required Moynan to approach them without questioning the characters' genders or sexualities). The other two approaches did, each in their own way, demand that the audience fundamentally challenge traditional heterosexual (and heterosexist) notions of sexuality and gender.

Edward's job was to recreate, as closely as possible, the conditions of a 16th century performance of a play by Shakespeare. To achieve this end, Edward focused on the use of rhetorical gesture. Rhetorical gesture is an acting technique (and, earlier, a manner of speaking) that was employed in Europe during the 17th through the 19th centuries. It is explicated in the teachings of the Roman rhetorician Cicero. It may very well have been employed in some form, during Shakespeare's time. This technique was

chosen because there is almost no documentation of the acting style that was used in 16th century England. The rationale behind the use of rhetorical gesture in our project came less from the argument that this technique had been documented as Early Modern than from a need to settle on an acting style that was consistent with a performance that required the audience to allow for a significant suspension of disbelief, since we assumed this was typical of the Early Modern period.

Rhetorical gesture is uniquely presentational: the emotions or ideas expressed by the actors in each line of dialogue are each accompanied by a gesture that symbolized the essence of what was being said or felt. They are also gender specific. For instance, there was a generally recognized feminine gesture for sadness and a generally recognized male gesture for anger. Significantly, Hamlet, in his speech to the actors, warns against excessive movement of the hands: “Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, by use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say) whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness” (2.3. 296). This suggests, at the very least, that Early Modern actors employed hand gestures.

The sets, costumes, and lighting for Edward’s historical recreations were also as faithful as possible to the scant information we have about production values of Shakespeare’s plays during his lifetime. English Renaissance theatrical costume (as rendered in the one or two extant drawings from the period) reveals actors in ensembles that combine contemporary Elizabethan clothing with small number of emblematic articles that aim at an approximation of historical accuracy, i.e. a piece of fabric thrown over a shoulder to indicate a Roman citizen, a helmet for a warrior. Thus, Edward’s Early Modern approach featured Elizabethan costumes borrowed from Stratford in order to stay true to the replication of the 16th century style of staging. The Early Modern theatre likely had no ‘sets’ as we know them today: a pole may have had to serve as a tree, or a stool as a throne. Edward’s version, similarly, employed a bare stage with only a seat for a throne or chair when needed. The stage of the public theatres was not a thrust (as many assume) but a raised platform – with the audience standing on the ground and seated in balconies almost fully surrounding it – which was the kind of platform stage that Edward employed. Performances happened in the afternoon – thus there was no stage lighting – a

convention also employed in our historical recreation. The stage picture for our Elizabethan presentation was, thus, very much like the Elizabethan one may have been. Each summer our audiences – like the Early Modern ones – watched one performance of the scene on a raised platform, in which young men played women employing elaborate theatrical gestures and wearing elaborate Elizabethan costumes, wigs and makeup, with minimal set pieces under general (i.e. non-theatrical) lighting.



PHOTOGRAPHER: Nigel Gough
Patrick Murphy, Ryan Kotack, Adam Pellerine and Andrew Cromwell

My ‘queer’ directorial approach was significantly different than Edward’s, though both featured cross-dressing. Edward’s directorial approach was to recreate a non-realistic style that would have been equivalent – if not the same as – an Elizabethan acting style. I worked with my actors to create detailed, realistic contemporary performances. *As You Like It* was set in a modern day Romani camp (what would have been previously called a ‘gypsy’ camp) in eastern Europe, *The Winter’s Tale* was set in the house of a modern day sex trade worker (a dominatrix), and *Antony and Cleopatra* was set in the bedroom of teenage girl contemplating committing suicide over Justin Bieber. Rosalind, Paulina, Hermoine, and Cleopatra were all played by male student actors. Also, some male roles (Jacques de Boys and Jacques in *As You Like it*, and the character of the guard in *Antony and Cleopatra*) were played by female student actors. The guard in Antony and Cleopatra became Cleopatra’s annoying younger brother, dressed in a football uniform. The milieus for my ‘queer’ approach were chosen partially

because I hoped that if the young actors were playing characters close to their own age in a contemporary setting then the scenes might be realistic, both funny and emotionally involving, in a contemporary way. Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* was a young sexy dominatrix taunting and teaching her old client Leontes (played by an older, professional actor) and leading him through a gallery of her whores. One of her whores turned out to be Hermoine – resembling a young Joan Crawford, vulnerable and sexual, an old film clip come to life – who excites old Leontes' memory and pity. Rosalind in *As You Like It* (played by the incomparable Nigel Gough, a student who tragically died in a freak bike accident soon after The Shakespeare Experiment ended) seemed very much like a saucy, sexy young gypsy girl until he removed his wig during the final speech. It is here that Shakespeare makes the only theatrical reference to the actuality of boy actors, when Rosalind says: "If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me" (5.4. 131). At this moment Gough (who was a young, openly gay actor) revealed himself not only as male, but as gay, and flirted directly with the male members of the audience.

Edward's historical approach and my more contemporary approach had one thing in common. Both were attempting to take the text seriously, that is to activate all the emotional moments in the drama and the human moments in the comedy. This is a radical notion that can help us to understand the queering of Shakespeare. I say radical, because cross-dressing has been viewed, historically, in western culture as simply a humorous device. But cross-dressing is only a gag when it is framed that way and framing cross-dressing as 'merely' comic, is indicative of deeper cultural prejudices. When viewing cross-dressed performances in which males play females, the key question is whether the disguise has been used to emphasize the differences or the similarities between men and women. This question is important because it points to two fundamentally different notions of gender. Gender essentialism (the idea that men and women's personalities and intelligences are influenced by biology) is reinforced when the differences between men and women are accentuated. However, when the similarities between men and women are stressed, we are reminded that the two genders are less different than we think. Perhaps gender traits are not inscribed, immutable and essential, but instead, culturally influenced. This kind of interpretation flies in the face of western gender-essentialist, heterosexist

plays, in which males only dress as females for a joke, relentlessly iterating the notion that men cannot – and should not – dress as women, because if they do, they will not only be ‘funny’ but will invite ridicule.

In the history of Western representation, from Greek plays to modern films (and excepting, I would posit, Elizabethan theatre), one thing is consistent. Males who dress as females are framed in such a way as to point out that males do not make convincing females and gender essentialism is thus reinforced. In a film like *Some Like It Hot*, for instance, the joke is that Jack Lemmon, a large and ungainly woman, convinces the thick-headed Joe E. Brown that he is sexy and desirable. In Sondheim’s musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (based on Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus*) a man dresses as a woman, but the joke is yet again that he is unconvincing, unwieldy, and ridiculous. In contrast, Edward and I directed our male actors playing female roles to emphasize the similarities, not the differences, between men and women. We made every attempt to accentuate the notion that young men can be convincing as women. We did this by taking advantage of these young men’s beauty, their high voices, their slender, hairless limbs, and whatever natural effeminacy they were endowed with as well. We chose the feminine looking boys to play women, and did everything we could with costume and training to encourage the illusion. There were very few laughs, in either directorial approach, at the expense of the young men playing women; that is in serious, or sympathetic comic, roles.



PHOTOGRAPHER: Nigel Gough
Kyle Weltner

The only exception was when the young men were playing broadly comic roles. Here the audience laughed at them (not with them); but I think this is consistent with the way an audience would have reacted to these roles if women played them. Audrey, the unapologetically sensual country girl, in *As You Like It*, was played by a large and unfeminine boy in Edward's scene. The actor was trying his best to act in a feminine manner and look that way, but did not fully succeed in this task. This may have seemed, to some, to have been funny in only a heterosexist way i.e. as having been about ridiculing women. I don't think this was the case. Audrey was played by David Tomlinson in my version of *As You Like It*. David is an actor who makes an attractive, feminine – but tall, and somewhat hairy – drag queen. I would posit however, that the laughs at both of these versions of Audrey originated from the same place as they do when a female plays Audrey. What is funny in the part is predatory femininity, aggressive femininity, gross, sensual femininity. This is a woman acting in a way that we don't expect women to act in a heterosexist society, i.e. acting like a man. This is a joke that relates to what it means to be a woman in either a contemporary or Early Modern context and is inherent in the part. In other words, when we laugh at women who do not seem to be typical women, the laughter can be both radical and not; we are, on the one hand, soothing our own discomfort about people not fitting into gender roles. On the other hand such a presentation reminds us that all 'real' women are not actually always seamlessly feminine and womanly. A real woman who acts inappropriately (i.e. is highly sexually aggressive) in such a stage role, and a man acting in the same manner in the same role, produce the same result. We question our gender assumptions.

The focus that we had in the historical representation scenes on accentuating the similarities between men and women went a long way towards achieving the first of the three purposes of The Shakespeare Experiment, which was to replicate (as best we could) the experience of an Early Modern theatergoer watching a play in which boys play the women's roles. Keep in mind that The Shakespeare Experiment is not the first experiment of this type. Laurence Senelick, in *The Changing Room*, mentions several companies in the last century that attempted earnest historical re-creations in which young men have played women in Shakespeare's plays, including: Christian Camargo as Isabel Queen of France (opposite Mark Rylance as Henry V) at The Globe Theatre in

1997 and Adrian Lester as Rosalind in a Cheek by Jowl production from 1994. Senelick quotes Peter Brook: "One knows at every moment that it's a man playing a woman and yet one is all the more touched by the woman's feelings. I think one can boil this down to one simply thing. The art of theatre is suggestion. And suggestion never means spelling out" (149). However, from looking at photos of these English attempts at 'authenticity' and from Senelick's descriptions of them – Celia was portrayed as "an acidulous butch with thinning hair" (149) for instance – I am not persuaded that the focus was on making these young men convincing as women or on accentuating the similarities between men and women.

However, our Early Modern recreations in The Shakespeare Experiment, though stylized, aimed to make sure that the young men were convincing (and not ridiculous) as women in dramatic or sympathetic comic roles. This is because it is usually assumed that Shakespeare's heroines – even though they were played by boys – were meant to be taken seriously by Elizabethan audiences. No one would suggest that Shakespeare's boy actors played the touching scenes for laughs; in fact most scholars – including Robertson Davies in his book *Shakespeare's Boys Actors* and Joy Gibson in *Squeaking Cleopatras* – are focused on explaining how these young men might have achieved verisimilitude in female roles. They assume that, for instance, a twelve year old boy playing Gertrude, delivering her narration of Ophelia's death, would have touched the audience in the way author intended (or at least would have attempted to do so). Our experiment certainly confirmed this to be so. It became immediately apparent during the first year of The Shakespeare Experiment that lithe and only recently hirsute young men completely disappear *as men*.

Also, the English Early Modern theatre was highly theatrical, as described above. Actors wore Elizabethan dress for historical plays and performed on an almost bare stage in full light. Thus, beardless boys, hidden in women's breast/flattening female garb of the period, covered with elaborate wigs and extensive makeup, perhaps employing highly stylized feminine gestures, would have been an easily accepted aspect of the non-realistic convention. It's easy to see how the actual gender of the persons performing women under the voluminous petticoats became irrelevant. In other words, the Early Modern gender illusion required a minimum suspension of disbelief in the context of a theatre that

must have required a maximum of it.

Add to this, the fact (noted by Robertson Davies in *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*) that the lines that Shakespeare gave his female characters are often, arguably, some of Shakespeare's most evidently poignant verse. I defy any person with an ear for poetry or a moderately sensitive soul to listen to Gertrude's speech on the death of Ophelia, or Viola's 'willow cabin' speech – read aloud by male or female, adult or child, actor or non-actor – and not be moved to tears.

Finally, one must not forget that merely on the evidence of Shakespeare's plays alone, the idea of adolescence (as we know it today) was unheard of in the Renaissance. Males were either boys or men and the difference was clearly visible through the possession of a beard and/or the lack of a piping voice. *As You Like It*, which contains several fascinating discussions between Rosalind and Orlando on the similarities between women and boys, seems to indicate that Elizabethans considered all non-bearded individuals with high voices to be effectively gender equivalent i.e. significantly not male. Rosalind/Orlando states that "for every passion something and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour" (3.1.400-403). Collectively, these factors suggest that it was no problem for the Early Modern audiences to accept boys as women. It was certainly no problem for our audiences to do so and this may have been due to some of the factors that we shared with Early Modern presentations, i.e. Shakespeare's moving language, the concealing costumes, and the non-realistic acting conventions employed.

In the second and third year of The Shakespeare Experiment, Edward stopped worrying about whether or not the boys were convincing as women (they just *were*), and instead experimented with various levels of realism in terms of gestural performance. In the first year's *As You Like It*, the gestures were very formal – informed less by naturalistic, emotional acting to support them – whereas in the 2nd and 3rd years the gestures were supported by emotive acting that more resembled contemporary performances. Edward's work thus explored the many possibilities for gestural acting of the period and its relationship to contemporary, more naturalistic styles. For instance, in the first year, actors used rhetorical gesture as the primary way of expressing emotions and communicating. In the later two years, the actors pursued emotional objectives i.e.

resorted to a more naturalistic approach to their characters. This concentration on each character's emotional goals fueled the communication between actors onstage and rhetorical gesture became a way of embellishing or clarifying that in a presentational manner. Edward's interpretation of Hamlet's speech to the actors (in which Hamlet discouraged his actors from 'sawing' the air with their hands) was that he was exhorting them to be more naturalistic in their interpretations by being more economical with their rhetorical gestures. So although Edward's presentation was essentially unrealistic (unlike mine) – especially in the first year – there was a struggle with the notion of emotional realism and what that might have meant for the period. Nevertheless, an attempt to make the young men convincing as women was a goal that both the historical presentation and my presentation shared. The fact that the boys were able to effectively disappear as male in the historical presentation, suggests that it certainly would have been possible in Elizabethan times too.

There was, however, an important difference in the way the female characters were presented in our queer presentation and our historical one. That difference goes a long way towards achieving the other two purposes that were the focus of The Shakespeare Experiment, i.e. understanding the way modern audiences perceive cross-dressing in the theatre, and our attempt at 'queering' Shakespeare. In Edward's scenes, and my scenes, we did all we could to make the young men appear to be like women within the context of two very different styles of representation (Edward's essentially non-representational and mine essentially realistic). In both cases the young men did, to some degree, disappear as women. However, the presence of homosexuality disappeared only in Edward's historical reproductions. The Early Modern scenes did not appear to be 'gay' scenes, because the disappearance of the young men into the women's roles was complete, and the stylized staging was not sexual or suggestive. Although the texts of the scenes contained sexual references the scene playing was precisely the opposite, delicate – almost like music – with little physical contact between the actors. Even the kissing was stylized. In the one scene in the first year where the actors kissed, their lips never met. Instead the kiss was indicated by a rhetorical gesture. In contrast, however, though the queer interpretation featured young men doing their best to disguise themselves as women (and often succeeding) the scenes still seemed 'gay.'

The omnipresence of ‘gayness’ in my scenes had to do with both ‘camp’ and ‘drag.’ Both need to be defined. My definition of camp is borrowed from Susan Sontag, who in her definitive article in 1964 suggested that camp was profound and humane: “Camp is generous....camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature” (293). For Sontag, true camp requires that the audience have a simultaneously comic and tragic experience, that they be “serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (289).

I have my own personal definition of drag. For me, drag usually means a gay man dressing up as a woman for fun and/or work, not as a daily choice, a lifestyle choice, or a sexual choice, but for occasional performing fun (or to make money lip-synching in a bar). What distinguishes drag from female impersonators is that drag performers are out and gay, or at least might be assumed to be so. What separates a drag queen from a transgendered person is that the person is not living as another gender, but acting as another gender for pay and/or play.

Both camp and drag want to have it both ways, and they do. This is probably one of the most difficult things for some straight people to understand about gay culture: the delicate balancing act that drag carries out between comedy and seriousness, between disbelief and belief. Camp implies hyperbole and over-the-top, exaggerated, melodramatic performance. Yet it also requires us to love the performance and the text, because it’s not simply parody; the comedy is founded on affection and seriousness. Drag is not about men disappearing completely as woman. This is not because men are trying to accentuate the fact that they are not women, but because some drag queens are enormously believable and some are not. We know about drag, and connect it with homosexuality, and we know that some men enjoying dressing up as women and that they are called gay drag queens. The result is that by sheer force of will, and the power of performance, a drag queen can convince us that she *might as well* be a woman, or is certainly a creature that is part man and part woman. Drag is a style of cross-dressing that wishes to have it both ways. Unlike female impersonators or transexuals, whose aims are to convince us utterly that they are really men or women, drag wishes to convince us essentially but not completely. We wish these men were women, and *almost* believe they are.

Similarly, camp is a genre that wishes to have it both ways. Camp wishes to be

comic and serious at the same time. This is in contrast to comedy, and tragedy, that in genre terms, are defined primarily by how different they are and how different our responses are to them. In my presentation of a scene from *The Winter's Tale*, for instance, the gallery that old Leontes visited featured comic drag presentations but the trip was a tragic event and morally ambivalent; an old man was being forced to look at a young prostitute who inevitably reminded him of his young wife. Forcing him to do so was an act of revenge on the part of the prostitute (Hermoine) who organized the presentations. The scene was funny, yes, but also horrible and sad.

Usually drag performers who do camp presentations are out and gay. However, in The Shakespeare Experiment only one of the student actors who executed a drag performance was out and gay (Nigel Gough). Surprisingly, this was a non-issue during rehearsal. Nigel was clearly emotionally and intellectually invested in his drag work in the show which I think made the rehearsal and performance process particularly rewarding for him (and the spectators). The other (heterosexual) actors were not emotionally and intellectually involved in the same way, yet there was little or no reluctance on the part of these young actors to explore feminine roles 'in a drag context' and many of them were quite supremely effective on stage. In none of the scenes did the boys fool anyone; they were clearly male, though beautiful, feminine young males, flirting with other males as part of their performance and even occasionally kissing or caressing them in my scenes. We certainly tried to make the young men look like women and depending on the physical features of the young men, they were more or less convincing. Importantly though, the young men who played these roles were naturally effeminate and/or naturally beautiful when dressed as women: wearing women's makeup, wigs and contemporary female clothing. They were essentially but not completely convincing as women.

One of the reasons why this occurred was because most people in a contemporary audience know about 'homosexuals' and the connection between homosexuality, femininity and drag. Younger, novice and often, straight drag queens were also surrounded by seasoned older actors, gay males who had drag experience. Each year Ryan Kelly and David Tomlinson played small drag queen roles: Celia and Audrey in *As You Like It*, Iras in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Ryan Kelly (on the serious end of the camp

spectrum) sang in a seamless touching soprano at the end of *As You Like It* and David Tomlinson's whorish clowning as Audrey and Iras in *Antony and Cleopatra* was unmistakably sexual and funny in the way that drag queens often are. These performances helped to contextualize the younger men's performances as drag, and encouraged what I call the 'flash' response. I would imagine that theatre-goers would 'flash' back and forth when watching two young men in a romantic scene. The 'flash' would be between feeling they were watching a man and a woman in a romantic scene and between feeling they were watching a 'gay' scene.



PHOTOGRAPHER: Blair Kay
David Tomlinson and Ryan Kelly

The young men's performances in my scenes were not only drag performances but they were camp in the way they elicited the generous humane response that Susan Sontag speaks of. In our *Antony and Cleopatra*, the audience saw a young, beautiful, feminine woman, played by a young man, committing suicide by ingesting a bottle of pills, and dying in her sister's arms. I judged (from the audience response) that they were both moved and amused. They may have been uncertain whether they should have laughed or cried, but some certainly knew that there was something 'gay' about what they were watching.

We know this because of the answers to the questions that we distributed in our audience surveys. The purpose of the survey was to address the second goal of The Shakespeare Experiment: understanding how contemporary audiences view and

understanding cross-dressing in a theatrical context. The first summer a graduate student (along with John Pollard of York's Institute for Social Research) worked together with me to devise a survey that was distributed to an audience composed of mainly Guelph students, their families, as well as some Buddies in Bad Times Theatre queer fans. The survey contained ten questions and was revised between the first and the last year. The revisions were focused on trying to trick the audience into being honest, keeping in mind that present day notions of what is 'politically correct' sometimes inhibit people from expressing their honest attitudes on the subject of sexuality. By the second year, questions had become gentle and coaxing, utilizing multiple choice and with ample space for audience members to elaborate on their answers if they wished. The most important questions were the following:

1. When I see a male playing the role of a female character, it
 - a) hinders Shakespeare's poetry
 - b) helps me to hear Shakespeare's poetry better
 - c) makes no difference
2. On the scale from 1 to 10 how true to life do you feel Shakespeare's representations of women are in his plays? Of the three versions of the scene presented, which seemed the most real and natural to you?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10 how comfortable are you in general seeing a man play woman's role? Please tell us why you feel this way.
4. Do you think a gay man brings any special qualities or talents to portraying a female character in general?
5. If I were to discover that Shakespeare was a homosexual or had a male lover this discovery would make me look at his work differently. Disagree? Agree?

The audience responses proved revealing. Despite the fact that audiences viewed three very different scenes each evening, despite the fact that in Moynan's 'Stratfordesque' approach there was no cross-dressing (except for when it was required in *As You Like It*), despite the fact that in Edward's 'historical re-creation' the cross-dressing was not linked with sexuality and the boys appeared to be women, and finally, despite the fact that it was only in my scenes that there was an overt connection made between cross-dressing and sexuality, some audience members, in their survey answers,

insisted on making the assumption that theatrical cross-dressing (and indeed all theatre in general) is nearly always 'gay'.

In the fifth question of a ten question survey distributed after *The (first) Shakespeare Experiment* in 2008, some spectators wrote they were comfortable with cross-dressing in various mediums because "yes, I'm not homophobic" or because "homophobia is over." One gay man said he was comfortable with cross-dressing onstage simply "because I'm a homo." Others, in contrast, seemed to take the view that theatrical cross dressing has nothing to do with sexuality saying "acting is acting" or "just acting a role." One audience member went so far as to answer the question with the word "art". Another question (the fifth question listed above) produced similarly polarized answers to a different, but related, subject matter. Some who answered the question about Shakespeare having a male lover were interested in considering Shakespeare's sexuality because "homosexuality has a long standing relationship with the arts." Another said, similarly, "the theatre has always been gay and slightly disrespectful." Others, in contrast, were not interested in Shakespeare's sexuality "because his plays aren't about his sexuality" and "it's pretty irrelevant to his artistic merit." One said, again, simply, "art is art."

In terms of the survey, our experiment was to give the audience a neutral template (Moynan's 'Stratfordesque' Shakespeare) juxtaposed against two other scenes. We hoped that with Moynan's scene representing, for audiences, the type of Shakespeare presentation they were most familiar with, it would allow them to then examine the other two presentations and compare them to the 'norm.' They had viewed Edward's historical re-creation, a Shakespearean scene in which the cross-dressed boys were completely convincing as women and in which homosexuality – and to some degree all sexuality – seemed to disappear. This scene was again juxtaposed against my scene, in which the cross-dressed boys were convincing, but the approach was 'camp' allied with drag, producing a theatre experience that was ultimately 'gay.' The question was, after seeing a relatively diverse group of presentations, how might they express their ideas about the relationship between cross-dressing and sexuality? Audiences seemed to be quite evenly split on opposite ends of the spectrum. For some, cross-dressing was 'art' (as in Edward's historical scenes) and for others, cross-dressing was inevitably linked to being gay (my

scenes).

My ulterior motive for approaching the final scene in a camp manner, employing drag, was, of course, to achieve the third purpose of The Shakespeare Experiment, which was to effectively queer Shakespeare: to challenge, through theatrical evidence, the notion that Shakespeare's plays do not lend themselves to queer interpretations. Shakespeare's plays seem to invite interpretations that challenge traditional sexuality. The plays are very sexual, for instance. The characters often make sexual jokes that are sometimes excised in contemporary productions, or that may be ignored by contemporary audiences because they are based on puns that are incomprehensible to a modern ear. In my production of the scene from *As You Like It*, Audrey (portrayed by David Tomlinson) was an obvious stereotypical 'hooters' girl, or Playboy bunny-type, fumbling around with a jockstrap at one point, fellating a bottle at another, but in true drag queen style, the character was still sympathetic and 'real'. A woman of this type is suggested by the text; she is characterized as possibly promiscuous in no uncertain bawdy terms. It is possible that she is an unattractive girl, who has had to use her body freely in order to get a lover, or that she is an attractive girl who has been called 'sluttish' and unattractive in an attempt to demean her. It's impossible to figure out exactly what Audrey is about because there is so much innuendo hurled at her, and yet she rarely speaks. She doesn't sound very intelligent (certainly her wit bears no comparison to Rosalind's). Her lover, Touchstone, and Jacques have an extended discussion about her 'honesty.' This means, in Elizabethan terms, her sexual virtue. Though Audrey defends her virtue, she talks quite openly with the men about promiscuity and its relationship to sexual attractiveness. "I am not a slut, though I thank the Gods that I am foul" (3.3.33). The joke here is to some degree on Audrey and all 'loose' women, for the rather academically complex sexual argument is about whether unattractive women are all sluttish. Audrey is proud that she is a plain nice girl, but the cynical Jacques, not skeptical of the plainness, does question whether or not she is virtuous. The Arden Shakespeare suggests that the double meaning of Audrey's defense of herself is that she is, though ugly, also 'clean.' This raises the question of whether a virtuous girl of the period would even address such a question. Rosalind doesn't. But again, we are delving into the kind of sexual detail that a contemporary audience in a regional theatre might prefer *not* to be privy to, but that

seems to have been acceptable to audiences in the Early Modern period.

Another reason that it seems appropriate to focus on sexuality in Shakespeare's work is that plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra* are thematically connected to issues of sexuality that are still relevant today. A Shakespearean audience viewing *Antony and Cleopatra* would have found Shakespeare's choice of hero and heroine inappropriate for a tragedy and may have viewed the play itself as somewhat of a farce or at least as a bawdy travesty. Cleopatra would, to many audience members, have simply been a whore and Antony's fate, as her de-masculinized anti-hero (Samson to her Delilah), would have made him, for many pre-twentieth century critics, an unfit protagonist for a serious play. As Cynthia Marshal says: "*Antony and Cleopatra* defies much of what we have come to expect from either a history play or a heroic tragedy: Antony shares the spotlight with Cleopatra, the point of view is uncertain, and heroic virtue is in scant supply" (298). However, it is precisely the play's celebration of the feminine that makes possible a drag vehicle. My approach to *Antony and Cleopatra* was founded on the notion that audiences in Shakespeare's day would have thought that being asked to sympathize with Cleopatra as a tragic figure would have required a huge cultural leap in judgment: one that could only be matched by my asking a contemporary audience to feel pity for a teenage girl committing suicide over Justin Bieber (a hero as false and de-masculinized as Antony was for Early Modern spectators). The genre insecurity of the work that has often been cited as a criticism of it, suggests to me that the play may have been written, to some degree, as camp. Note that cross-dressing is mentioned near the end of the play. Cleopatra alludes to the possibility that, after her death, she will be portrayed by boy actors (in 'drag') as a prostitute: "Antony / Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore" (5.2. 265-268). Most contemporary directors of Shakespeare, and most contemporary audiences, conceive of the part as a tragic role. It's difficult for us to imagine that the boy who played the original Cleopatra courting theatrical disbelief in the same way that Cleopatra (the character) talks about some boy 'squeaking' in her role. For contemporary scholars, this remark presents a conundrum: for would not the boy who was speaking these lines about squeaking Cleopatras, possibly. . . squeak? In other words, Cleopatra, here, hopes that she will not be presented as whorish drag presentation of herself. This must prove,

therefore, that the boy playing her would most certainly have *not* have interpreted the role as drag burlesque, as an evidently cross-dressed, whorish, drag queen. But could Shakespeare have been making an ironic comment on his own presentation of *Antony and Cleopatra*? In a camp interpretation, both of these situations are possible. In other words we need not have *either* a serious adult woman (Vivien Leigh, for instance, who played the role in 1951) as Cleopatra *or* a squeaking, bawdy boy as a drag queen joke. Instead, we can have both. The young man who played Cleopatra in my scenes was a very beautiful in drag and did not ‘squeak.’ He was a very convincing pathetic teenage girl who made us laugh and cry at the same time.

Just because I may have effectively queered Shakespeare’s works, and just because the work itself may invite sexual interpretation, does that mean that the work itself is intrinsically queer? Am I imposing my own interpretation? It’s not easy to imagine my queer interpretations ever reaching the Stratford (Ontario) stage or being part of any mainstream presentation of Shakespeare. Mainstream audiences would be put off by a production that is as sexual as Shakespeare’s language suggests his original productions were intended to be. For many audience members and critics, such an interpretation would demean the work. This has to do with a whole history of criticism that carefully removes Shakespeare from sexual interpretations.

The contention, for critics, seems to be that Shakespeare’s plays (though they featured cross-dressed male actors in Early Modern performance) are – as the epitome of art – *by definition* removed, or immune, from issues of sexuality. Harold Bloom has no kind words for those who analyze Shakespeare’s play in terms of sexuality, saying the work “does not fit very easily into Foucault’s archives” (7). Bloom discourages a biographical reading of Shakespeare, suggesting that the man’s work transcends biography, something that many of those who attended The Shakespeare Experiment – as we saw from the evidence in the surveys – obviously also believed. Stanley Wells suggests that Shakespeare’s ability to understand others is more important than his own sexuality: “If Shakespeare himself did not, in the fullest sense of the word, love a man, he certainly understood the feelings of those who do” (65). Those who would place discussion of Shakespeare’s plays above issues of sexuality often set up art and sexuality as polar opposites: art is profound, universal and transcendent, whereas sexuality is not.

The implication is that by associating art and artists with sex and sexuality we underestimate it and perhaps demean it. What interests me is the similarity between the present day views of Bloom and Wells (and some other modern theorists), and the attitudes of conservative Elizabethans: the anti-theatricalists, for instance, who denounced theatre roundly and tried to stop it.

For myself, sexuality and theatre have always been inextricably connected and equally appealing has been the notion that art is a lie that tells the truth. I became involved in the theatre as an adolescent because it seemed an appropriate profession for an effeminate, creative boy. It offered an escape certainly, but one that was more intellectually challenging than hairdressing or flower arranging and less rigorous than ballet. Theatre was a place where I could hide, but not: be taken seriously and not. In other words, it was a place where my identity could be like drag or camp. Before I became involved in theatre my family and friends often remarked on my mannerisms: “Why do you move your hands like that?” I was suspect, perhaps homosexual; this was a serious issue. ‘The theatre’ seemed to some to be an appropriate place for my mannerisms and my interests to be displayed, but with the excuse that theatre people are, after all, ‘theatrical.’ So my sexuality became a little less visible or obvious, but the mannerisms and sensibility connected with it were still undeniably there, and I had a practical excuse to display them. People could laugh at the way I used my hands even though it still made them a bit uncomfortable. My mannerisms were, once I started theatre school, not just a cause for worry, but like camp, both serious and funny at the same time.

So for me ‘queering’ Shakespeare also meant challenging the notion that theatrical cross-dressing in the Early Modern period must, necessarily, have been unlike my personal experience with theatre and cross-dressing as a gay man, i.e. unrelated to sex or sexuality. In *The Shakespeare Experiment*, the purpose of separating the historical reconstruction scenes (in which young men simply disguised themselves as women) from the ‘queer’ scenes (in which same sex desire and gender play occur simultaneously) was to allow the audience to separate historical (asexual) cross-dressing from present day (gay) cross-dressing. Interestingly, some audience members simply could not wrench sexuality and cross-dressing apart.

Even within Edward's historical scenes, where every effort was made to weed out 'camp' or 'drag', these notions sometimes made their way into the scenes. For example, one of the actors playing a woman in the historically faithful Renaissance scene was a slightly older, out, gay professional actor. Edward (with the assistance of this actor working as a mentor for students) had directed the young male actors to use rhetorical gesture to indicate femaleness and not to alter their voices artificially. Nevertheless, this adult gay male actor's performance as a woman in the scene was, (although superficially in the same style as the young actors), if not a drag performance, then a performance in which flirtatiousness, grace and humour extended beyond impersonation and became tinged with sexuality, at least to my trained eye. The actor was slightly more melodramatic and graceful than the younger men but not in such a way as to disrupt the performance or to be noticed perhaps by an ordinary theatergoer. To me, there seemed to be very small 'quotation marks' around his impersonation that suggested the wit of camp.

Can I assume that such a thing happened in Elizabethan performances simply because it happened in ours? Here is where The Shakespeare Experiment ceases to be scientific and becomes a spur to my own creative theorizing. For when pondering this question I remember that the argument against a transhistorical notion of camp or drag (in Foucauldian fashion) would be that a ten year old Elizabethan apprentice (unlike our modern day adult gay actor) would not have known what drag was and that neither would the audiences watching him. However, David Halperin has suggested in *How to Do a History of Homosexuality* that though the homosexual may only have appeared as a human character type after Oscar Wilde, male femininity (and discomfort over it) is transhistorical in western culture. He suggests, for instance, that the act of having sex with men did not necessarily suggest that the perpetrators were 'homosexual' (i.e. a specific character type) before 1900. However an 'invert' (i.e. a feminine male) would be considered to be displaying the outward signs that might lead to social stigma no matter what his choice of sexual partners were. The fact that the modern conception of 'homosexuality' includes both same sex desire (between masculine men) and effeminate mannerisms that are not in the context of a sexual act (referred to as 'gender deviance' below) signals its complex development from origins which were then, and are still now, contradictory:

the definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality is a sign of its historical evolution: it results from the way homosexuality has effectively incorporated without homogenizing earlier models of same sex sexual relations and sex and gender deviance, models directly in conflict with the category of homosexuality that has nonetheless absorbed them. (12)

The fundamental difference between drag and impersonation is that the drag queen enjoys portraying a woman, does it effortlessly, and finds it not to be merely an acting job but a joy forever. As a man who enjoys submitting to other men in private acts of lovemaking and romance, the performance of femininity is much more than a craft or art: it is an obsession. There is nothing to say that an Early Modern adolescent who enjoyed the affections of other males (or who, thought young, may have yearned for it) might not have performed with a touch of 'drag' sensibility; they could have been young men who experienced, or were soon to experience, same sex desire in their lives.

I don't think that present day heterosexuals viewing *The Shakespeare Experiment* would have noticed the subtly gay, drag performance I observed (delivered by the older actor) in our historical reconstruction. The difference between a man simply 'impersonating' a woman, and a drag performance, is often minute, because drag queens who are also professional actors can be extraordinarily subtle, and even a fine heterosexual actor's professional impersonation of a woman can be terribly effective (after all, some straight men resemble women in or out of drag, and some drag queens are as talented as their 'straight' theatrical counterparts). Even more interestingly, I think the actor who executed the drag performance in *The Shakespeare Experiment* would probably not be pleased that I am singling him out as having accidentally done drag, and might even consider it a criticism of his skill as an actor. It's not.

Present day actors still worry about being thought of as drag queens rather than actors, and heterosexual actors often argue that impersonating a woman is more aesthetically honest than what drag queens, accused of making fun of women, do. Some also think it's easy for gay men to play women because they are naturally effeminate. This is not seen as a 'talent' but an affliction or simply a character trait. Many gay actors who play women are proud of the fact that they are not drag queens. I remember complimenting a 'bar' drag queen on her performance and having her say to me – clear as

day, as if it was a notion everyone was aware of – “Oh you’re *theatrical* drag. I’m *bar* drag. So that really comes as a compliment.” One performer is involved fundamentally with art, the other is associated quite significantly, with sex and sexuality.

The Shakespeare Experiment, with its juxtaposition of Early Modern and contemporary cross-dressing, leads me to ponder the similarities and differences between these early periods and our own around issues of art and sexuality. We will never have a laboratory situation that creates exactly the conditions of the early modern theatre and that makes our experiment necessarily inaccurate. However, nothing can stop me from musing about conceptions of same sex desire in the early modern period, and comparing it to what I know to be contemporary conceptions. My work on The Shakespeare Experiment makes me question a definitive distinction between issues of sexuality in the Early Modern period and our own. I would suggest that post-structuralism has so focused us on resisting the urge to impose our present day ‘gaze’ on, earlier periods, that notions of the transhistorical – even when they do exist – are ignored.

For instance, connections between art and sexuality are often made today that were also common in the Early Modern era. The art/sexuality connection – both then and now – is pervaded with anxiety and negativity about art and artifice. Today we have Bloom and Wells staunchly defending Shakespeare against Foucault and accusations that the bard was homosexual. In the Early Modern period anti-theatricalists like Stephen Gosson railed against homosexuality in the theatre: “the leudenes of the gods is altred and changed to the love of young men” (20). The anti-theatricalists also connected homosexuality in theatre with Plato’s injunction against lies and lying: “No marveyle though Plato shut them out of his schoole, and banished them quite from his common wealth, as effeminate writers, unprofitable members, and utter enimies of vertue” (11). Thus, theatre in the English Renaissance was rejected by the anti-theatricalists for not being real; for offering an inaccurate, misleading representation of reality, and also for presenting tempting images of vice. So there is proof that fear of same sex desire was present in the Early Modern period, perhaps, even more potently, there was a fear of male femininity. Both were linked with art and both these fears still persist and have been combined into an association (and sometimes fear) of the association of ‘gay’ and art. But what I think what is much more relevant to fears then and now, is fear of sex itself.

Sex, in the west, has traditionally been linked to notions of beauty, particularly feminine beauty, and to the lure of pleasure. Feminine beauty and pleasure, in the Early Modern period, were considered to be fundamentally dangerous. Stephen Greenblatt speaks of the importance of the destruction of the ‘bower’ in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, saying, “We can secure the self only through a restraint that involves the destruction of something intensely beautiful; to succumb to that beauty is to lose the shape of manhood and be transformed into a beast” (175). To succumb to beauty is to possibly surrender oneself to pleasure, and perhaps even surrender the future of mankind, by disregarding procreation. According to Greenblatt, in the Early Modern period “generation restores the sense of linear progression to an experience that threatens to turn in upon itself, reveling in its own exquisite beauty. A pleasure that serves it’s own end, that claims to be self justifying rather than instrumental, purposeful rather than generative, is immoderate and must be destroyed” (177). In other words procreation redeems sex and sex without it is frightening. In present day western culture, the same fears predominate. For instance, social critic Ian Brown, (writing recently on the movie *Bruno*) said that the sexual acts of the homosexuals cause him (and many others) to laugh, because of their ‘genetic futility.’ The lack of a discernable human product as the result of gay sex makes it laughable to some, frightening to others, and akin to both pornography and art, because it is a dangerously purposeless pleasure.

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt suggests that 20th century culture, our sensibility, our attitude to politics, art and sexuality, all find their seeds in the Renaissance. The juxtaposition of Early Modern and contemporary Shakespeare in our project couldn’t help but make me think of the juxtaposition of the predominant philosophies that pervaded the cultures in Shakespeare’s time in comparison to the prevailing philosophical mood today. In Early Modern culture neo-Platonists and anti-theatricalists argued about notions of art and lying and the sexual backstage antics of male actors. Recently, Baudrillard, like anti-theatricalists of the Early Modern period, warns against the dangers of art, and to some degree conflates art and pornography:

The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography, and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion. In porn, nothing is left to desire...But what could art possibly mean in a world that has already become

hyperrealist, cool, transparent, marketable? What can porn mean in a world made pornographic beforehand? All it can do is make a final, paradoxical wink -- the wink of reality laughing at itself in its most hyperrealist form, of sex laughing at itself in its most exhibitionist form, of art laughing at itself and its own disappearance in its most artificial form, irony. (25-26)

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard argues that representation has developed from the paradigm of the counterfeit (in the Renaissance) to production (during the industrial revolution) to simulation (in the present day). But though Baudrillard differentiates between Early Modern paradigms of representation and our own, his description of our postmodern 'hyperreal' world (as reflective of the cold pragmatic patterns of computer codes) is not immune to the transhistorical fears of sex and representation that are typical of western culture. For Baudrillard, both modern day sex and art have confused reality and fantasy. And beneath his hypnotic diatribes warning us of the hyperreal, there is more than a whiff of nostalgia for a reality unadorned by the sensuous treacheries of art. Baudrillard reminds me of the anti-theatricalists; his conflation of pornography and art is not unlike the conflation of imagined same sex practices in Renaissance dressing rooms with the plays themselves. The audience members of The Shakespeare Experiment were conflicted in the same way. The surveys revealed that they weren't sure if art was completely sexual (and gay), or not related to sexuality at all.

Shakespeare's opinion on the issue of the dangers of art is remarkably ambivalent. The plays, at any rate, hold a remarkably consistent ambivalent attitude towards art and artifice. This does not mean that Shakespeare had no attitude, but rather his attitude is pointedly ambivalent. This suggests to me that his work is, to some degree, about pondering whether or not art is in its essence, moral. Art and artifice are, on the one hand, the basis of truth: "the truest poetry is the most feigning" (3.3.16) says Touchstone in *As You Like It*. Yet, Hamlet rails famously against a woman's makeup when reviling Ophelia: "I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has/ given you one face and you make yourselves another. You/ jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance" (3.1.141-145). Lest we think that Hamlet is simply a Renaissance misogynist, it's important to note his distrust of actors and of language itself; both involved with representation. His own 'feigned' madness

raises serious questions about the efficacy of our senses in the context of dangerous fakery. His cautionary speech to his beloved actors is focused on the importance of accurately representing reality. And we must not forget his demonization of 'seeming' and his romanticization of 'being' earlier in the play when speaking to Gertrude: "Seems madam? Nay it is" (1.2.76).

Suspicion about art is, I would suggest, a by-product of capitalism. Certainly the ambivalence about art in both Shakespeare and Baudrillard, has a relationship to the inhumanity of capitalism. The coldness of Baudrillard's hyperreal is directly related to the coldness of the laws of the market which originated in the Early Modern era: "For, finally, it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential...and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it" (43). Shakespeare is somewhat obsessed with commerce and its relationship to art. He spends more than one sonnet attempting, through the language of commerce, to understand the essence of love and beauty. In *Twelfth Night* Olivia sarcastically itemizes her beauty: "O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted; I will give/out divers schedules of my beauty: it shall be/ inventoried, and every particle and utensil/ labelled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red;/ item, two grey eyes, with lids to/ them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth" (1.5. 233-237). Much of *The Merchant of Venice* is concerned with demonstrating how inappropriate love, sex, and sexuality seem, in the context of mercantilism. For Baudrillard, capital has turned our lives into art (and sex), which makes present day art (and sex), meaningless. For Shakespeare, beauty, art and sex are unquantifiable through the naïve machinations of accountancy and the marketplace. Yet his persistent attempts to quantify the market value of love and beauty make us suspicious of both love and capitalism, and any possible relationship between them. Shakespeare, like Baudrillard, seems to be suggesting that the marketplace through its connection with art, destroys reality.

The ambivalence about art in our contemporary culture is pervasive. In 2008, Stephen Harper stated that 'ordinary people don't care about the arts.' It's certainly likely that the government agency that funded this project (SSHRC) is under scrutiny by the Harper government. It is perhaps poignant that SSHRC Research and Creation Grant has now been discontinued, and that while the Harper government increases funding for

scientifically related research, it remains somewhat skeptical of arts-related research. I have no doubt that my musings here would be challenged by a Harper government as not being 'scientific' and perhaps not useful. This very essay, I would predict, would be a fecund cause for a budding parliament member who is hoping to make a career campaigning against the wastage of government money. I would suggest, however, that the present mania for establishing the usefulness of research findings has as much to do with capitalism as it does with science.

In the present paradoxical and contradictory age, so much like the Early Modern period in subtle ways, I think it's important to note that it is possible that Early Modern performances in which boys played women might, at the very least, had subtle 'drag' aspects. I value effeminacy and artifice, because they have transhistorically, in western culture, been linked to sex. The lie of art, and paradoxically, its innocence are both obsessions for Shakespeare. We see this when his married female characters (who are often criticized as being cosmetically enhanced beauties in 'disguise') are regularly accused of their deceiving husbands, and just as regularly found to be innocent, much to the husband's chagrin (*Merry Wives of Windsor*) or pain (*Othello*) or a perplexing amalgam of both (*Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*). The Early Modern period was suspicious of all manner of masquerade, which as many (including Greenblatt) have pointed out, was directly related to the transformation from feudalism to early capitalism. The sumptuary laws, which forbade citizens to dress in garments that were not appropriate for their station or gender, reflected a deep fear of people passing from one class to another in a pre-capitalist society that was becoming increasingly fluid. Our society, I would argue – from culture critics like Baudrillard to literary critics like Bloom and Wells – is equally suspicious of the dangerous, sexual aspects of art and masquerade. The reasons for these suspicions in these two different periods may seem superficially different but I would argue that they are fundamentally the same. There may not have been a concept of a 'gay' person in Early Modern times. Capitalism was only in its infancy, and religion pervaded most aspects of social culture. Today, in contrast, many in the west do not live their lives according to religious tenets, gays are openly tolerated, and capitalism (albeit with significant government intervention) rules. But I would argue, along with Greenblatt, that the seeds of modern culture and philosophy that were present in the Early

Modern period are flowering today, and this is why Shakespeare's plays often seem to relevant to us.

Obviously, my conclusions are not strictly scientific. The thoroughness of our surveys might be challenged; they may have prejudiced spectators towards certain answers. Our historical re-creations are based on the scant historical fact available and inarguably, I am gay and have a prejudice: I wish to see Shakespeare 'queered.' Nevertheless, I can explain my own fascination with the exploration of cross-dressing in the Early Modern period through my personal urge to give myself up to theatre, and lying, and the dangers of posing as a girl, and the seductive power of art: the art and pornography that surround us in the mass media, in all its hyperreality, its alluring instability, and its 'gayness.' I feel somewhat like a seductress here and almost as if this essay itself has become a bit of a drag performance. Dare we be seduced by art that is in its essence, because of its transhistorical cultural associations, also tainted with sex?

Tom Ford, the director of his recent film adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's novel *A Single Man*, would like us to understand that he is gay but that he doesn't 'define himself' by his sexuality. What does Tom Ford mean that he is not defined by his gayness? Well, he means that the old signifiers of gay – effeminacy and promiscuous sex – no longer define him. When being gay is no longer gay, I would choose to be an aesthetically promiscuous imposter who flirts perilously with profundity but refuses to be pinned down; a man who plays a woman much, much, too well. The hope for this essay is to seduce you into imagining and musing, with art as a catalyst. Perhaps your reaction to the ideas within and to *The Shakespeare Experiment*, is relevant to the fears and expectations we all have about what art – in a world ruled by science and technology – should, and might, be allowed to do.

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