

# ***Cross-dressing the Early Modern: Exploring Transformations through Dress***

DEMNI Conference 2022

## **Abstracts**

### **Session 1**

#### **Eleanor Birch (Pembroke College, Oxford)**

##### *Saints and Sinners: Female bodies and male attire in late medieval England*

This paper will look at the ways late medieval hagiographical writers and theologians commended female saints for cross-dressing but harshly condemned, and punished medieval women for the same act. In 1495, Alice Street was arrested for dressing in male clothing to follow her lover across the country. She is only one of many women discovered in male clothing. It may have seemed that her change in dress was an outward symbol of her sexual 'perversions' or preferences, but her reasons for dressing in male clothing may have been quite other. The detail that she was caught while travelling may shed light on Alice's situation. It is entirely possible that Alice's gendered disguise was an attempt at self-protection since she was travelling in a society that failed adequately to prosecute sexual assaults. For Alice, it might have felt too dangerous to travel in female clothing. Books about saints' lives were becoming increasingly popular and widespread by Alice's lifetime. Tales of female saints who cross-dressed in order to escape sexual danger and seek spiritual salvation were a popular genre within hagiographic literature in medieval England. Their sartorial transformation was even valorised as an attempt to seek spiritual closeness to God through a monastic order. The lives of these cross-dressing saints, such as St Theodora who stole her husband's clothing to enter a monastery, or saints Marina/Marinus and Euphrosyna, who adopted male clothing to escape sexual assault and enter a monastery, appear in Jacobus de Voraigne's *Golden Legend* (circa 1266) or the Middle English *Gilte Legende* (circa 1438) and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, (c.1405). This paper seeks to answer the question of how Alice Street and other women in similar situations understood their place within this theological and cultural juxtaposition.

#### **Alla Cherniak (Ben Gurion University, Be'er-Sheva)**

##### *The Mystery of the Dark Garment: Self-representation as Virago in the Self-Portraits of Sophonisba Anguissola (c. 1535 - 1625)*

The proposed presentation examines the iconography of the garment that appears regularly in the self-portraits of Sophonisba Anguissola in the context of her construction of her artistic identity. Her dark, modest garment is different from the luxurious dresses depicted in 16<sup>th</sup> century female portraits.

The artist's unusual choice is usually explained as influenced by Baltasare Castiglione's advice about the clothes of the courtier in *The Book of Courtier*, and as a garment that expresses modesty. However, Castiglione's recommendations apply to men only. Moreover, Anguissola painted herself in the dark outfit while she was not yet a courtier. When she was appointed to a position in the

court, she painted herself in luxurious garments. If the garment is meant to express modesty, it is not clear why the artist portrayed her sisters or herself as a courtier in ornate clothing.

I would argue that the role of Anguissola's garment is to allude to a man's dark clothes in order to shape her identity as a woman of *masculine* (artistic) *ability*. Her masculine garment is a part of a set of *masculine* characteristics that appears constantly in her self-portraits. The purpose of her masculine representation is to shape her identity as a *virago*. *Virago* was an early modern concept which represented a woman whose personality combined *masculine* and *feminine qualities*. Her *masculine qualities* allow her to act *like a man*, in the case of Anguissola – to be an artist. In Anguissola's time the prevailing perceptions denied women the creative ability necessary for an artist. The existence of creative women like Anguissola challenged this perception. The concept of *Virago* explained this phenomenon. Despite the importance of the concept, it has not received sufficient reference in the research literature. Anguissola is one of many pictorial representations of early modern women as *Viragos*.

### **Cynthia Sadler (European University Institute, Florence)**

#### *A man's clothing – a woman's pleasure*

Marie Antoinette Joséphe Saucerotte, better known as Mlle Raucourt, was a star actor of the Comédie Française in 18th century Paris. Debuting quite spectacularly in 1772, at 16 years, it was soon her private life that made the spotlight and not her acting anymore. Parisian press and pamphlétaires, attacked her for her love for women. In fact, on the 27 March 1777 a certain Thomas Violet filed a report at the Châtelet, in the protocol he said that he had seen Raucourt in men's clothing at 2 am in the morning accompanied by her then lover Mlle Souques. Mlle Raucourt, never wore men's clothing on stage but in private; defying gender boundaries. I suppose wearing them in private, was a way to express her desire for women and the pleasure she took in pursuing them. David Orvis wrote in an article about crossdressing as a way to express male same sex desire in theatre, I'd like to expand this to a female dimension as it seemingly weren't only men that crossdressed for pleasure.<sup>1</sup> I ask myself several questions. One of them, did Raucourt prefer a men's habit in her most private, when it was only her and her partner? Why did she take on wearing men's clothes? Was it for her personal comfort? Maybe it was on another level, trying to fit her desires and pleasures into the binary system that was dominating at her time and she re-enacted on stage in the theatre pieces: lovers had to be male and female, so she took on a male part in her conquests and relationships?

### **Session 2**

#### **Ezra Horbury (University of York)**

“Virgins' tears [...] Might blanch a blackamoor”: Blackface and Transmasculinity in *The Fatal Contract*

This paper is from a research project on the intersections of transgender embodiment or performance with the vectors of age, race, and disability in early modern literature, arguing for understanding an intersectional construction of early modern gender via transgender theory. The paper investigates the interplay of blackface and cross-dressing in William Heminge's *The Fatal Contract*, in which the white rape survivor Chrotilda disguises herself as a Black eunuch to seek revenge on those who wronged her. Chrotilda reinvents herself as a Black eunuch who indulges fantasies of rape and forced impregnation to serve the Queen's violent desires, fuelling a Sapphic

dynamic. The play tests the bounds of essentialist and performed identity in early modern conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality, variably enforcing and subverting these norms. Against the backdrop of earlier cross-dressed page plays (e.g., *Twelfth Night*, *Philaster*, *The Honest Man's Fortune*), this paper investigates this little-known racial elaboration on an old plot. The paper focuses on early modern approaches to the gendering of race, situating itself among transgender theory and early modern Black studies; the paper draws particularly on the work of Dean Spade and resisting state violence, Jack Halberstam and gender realness, Kim F. Hall on the racialisation of selfhood, and Ania Loomba on the early modern construction of race. It charts Chrotilda's appropriation of the Black body, the complex performance of an Orientalised eunuch with fantasies of enacting rape, and the risk that white transmasculinity can become complicit in white supremacist fantasies. The paper investigates the complex interplay of transmasculine gender performance and racial appropriation, exploring Chrotilda's varying resistance to and complicity in sexual violence as a means to empower herself through the denigration of Black men.

**Sophie Eichelberger (University of North Carolina)**

*Constructing Identity through Embodiment: How the Kerchief Created Onnagata's Gender in the Early Edo Period (1603-1700)*

Kabuki theater was a popular form of entertainment for both the samurai and townspeople alike in Edo, the capital of Japan from 1603-1868. In 1629 women were banned from acting in kabuki because of the connections between the theater and prostitution. In their place, female roles in kabuki were performed by *wakashu*, or males who were still youths; the *wakashu* who performed female roles in kabuki were called *onnagata*, which translates literally as "female-like." By the late seventeenth-century, *onnagata* were an established role in kabuki, and famous actors such as Ayame I were celebrities in Edo. Ayame I was also renowned because he wore his female "costume" not only inside of the theater, but outside, as well. Actors such as Ayame I believed that to portray the most accurate representation of femininity on stage, *onnagata* actors should dress as women off-stage. However, even as *onnagata* otherwise dressed in female garb, they always styled their hair as youth males, with shaved forelocks or a purple kerchief. The propensity of *onnagata* to dress as women yet still be identifiable as male due to their shaved forelocks or purple kerchief has led to scholars of early modern Japan to refer to *onnagata* as the "third-gender" of the Edo period. The central paradigm this paper addresses is how to understand identity in the early Edo period so that *onnagata* are included in a gender system. Are the concepts of "male" and "female" enough to capture the *onnagata* identity, or does a new framework need to be considered to include *onnagata*? This paper draws on the concept of situated bodily practice from Joanne Entwistle and trans-ing gender from Clare Sears to argue for the importance of clothing—specifically the purple kerchief—in creating a gender for the *onnagata* based on both age and sex.

**Philip Allen (Midwestern State University, Texas)**

*Cross-Dressing to Protect and (Pre)serve: Lope de Vega's Vengeful Vixens*

The maintenance of personal and familial honor is a central tenant of all of the literature produced during Spain's so-called Golden Age. The early modern obsession with honor is especially prominent in the oeuvre of the country's most prolific author: Lope de Vega (1562-1635). Although the established social order of the time dictated that the protection and preservation of honor was exclusively the obligation of a man of the family, the issue could become increasingly complex in situations in which a male relative was absent or incapacitated. Such is the case in two theatrical

dramas penned by the author, *La villana de Getafe* (1620) and *La moza de cántaro* (ca. 1618), two plays in which the female protagonists had no other option but to cross-dress as men in order to protect and preserve either their own honor or that of their entire family due to injustices committed against them by a third party. Supported by Melveena McKendrick's taxonomy of the early modern Spanish *mujer varonil*, or manly woman, this presentation will examine the socio-historical circumstances that permitted such extraordinary behavior by female characters, how such actions were received by contemporary audiences, and how these plays have been adapted for modern audiences both on the stage and in cinemas and television. By doing so, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of how the topic of cross-dressing in the original texts represent early modern societal sensitivities and how these preoccupations have evolved and transformed, if at all, over the subsequent centuries. Furthermore, this paper will address the complex paradox of how the early modern established social order could be maintained by breaking such a fundamental and controversial taboo during the time.

### Session 3

#### Gefan Wang (King's College, London)

##### *Cross-Dressing in the Floating World: the Portrayal of the Niwaka Festival in Edo Ukiyo-e*

This paper examines the depictions of cross-dressed female courtesans and geishas at the zestful Niwaka Festival in ukiyo-e dated between late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Niwaka Festival, hosted by the Yoshiwara pleasure district in the city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo), is a grand celebration of street performances and rituals dedicated to Inari Ōkami, the god of foxes and agriculture with male, female and sometimes androgynous appearances. Notably, female courtesans and geishas would dress up in male costumes across different professions and cultures during the fanciful parades. Ukiyo-e art, flourishing in early modern Japan, offers meticulous depictions of the playful and liberating cross-dressing tradition of Yoshiwara women. Representative paintings include Kitagawa Utamaro's *Fan Dancer*, *Country Maiden Autumn Dancer*, and *Full Moon Blossom* (舞扇名取月、田舎娘、秋の手踊り、女郎花盛の望月) (c. 1790) and *Tojin, Shi-shi, Sumo* (唐人、獅子、角力) (c. 1791). It should be noted that while the *onnagata* acting in Edo kabuki theatre – men playing women's roles – has received substantial interest from the west, there has been quite limited literature on the female to male cross-dressing culture of Niwaka. Closely looking at ukiyo-e works portraying the Niwaka Festival, this paper discusses how the socially marginalised Yoshiwara women interpreted Edo male identity on stage during the Niwaka Festival. This study will also conclude that ukiyo-e art of the Niwaka Festival reflects significant changes in late Edo Japanese society, including shifts in gender roles and new interpretations of ancient rituals.

#### Marco Bei (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa)

##### *"Talora in abito di femmina, talora di maschio": Roleplay of powerful women in mica overlay miniature portraits*

Mica overlay miniature portraits are found among the collections of many important museums in Europe. They have not been a forefront topic in academic discussion, and only a few papers were recently interested in cataloguing this kind of luxurious and fragile artistic production. Most of the remaining pieces represents female sitters, often identified with queens (e.g., Henrietta Maria of England) and noblewomen, painted in watercolour or oil on vellum or ivory. They come with many sets of semi-transparent overlays applicable in little boxes, also painted with a varied array of

costuming, including male presenting facial features (beards, moustache) and clothing (hats, religious or exotic garments, etc.). Although I agree with previous studies, such as the seminal one by Evelyn Ackerman, that the key to rightly interpreting these works is the central importance of theatre, masques and courtly feasts, I have to reject these explanations as only English (or Northern in general) in origin. Reading the *Notizie dei Professori del Disegno* by Filippo Baldinucci, we find that the invention of this kind of “amusements” is to be attributed to Baccio del Bianco (1604 –1657), painter and scenic designer for the Medici and Hapsburg courts. Baldinucci, counsellor to the Granduca for acquiring old masters’ miniature-portraits, does not intend mica overlays as fine arts, but still praises their “utility” for their “intended public”. Far from being an ideological tool for catholic propaganda then, this works must be intended as a jolly roleplay exerted all around Europe by powerful women, as we know for certain in the case of later queens such as Christine of Sweden.

**Sandra Racek (Northwestern University / Art Institute of Chicago)**

*Displaying the Power of Women: Cross-Dressing and inversion in Amalia van Solms’s Il pastor fido cabinet at Honselaarsdijk*

This paper will focus on figurations of cross-dressing and inversion of social asymmetries between women and men thematized in the decoration of Amalia van Solm’s private cabinet at Honslaarsdijk, the summer hunting retreat of the princes of Orange. Specifically, I will analyze the four largest paintings produced in 1635 and inspired by *Il pastor fido* (*The Faithful Shepherd*), a late sixteenth-century pastoral play by the Italian diplomat and poet Giovanni Battista Guarini (fig. 1-4). Together, the paintings distill the story of a wily shepherd, Myrtillo, who pursues a nymph of higher social status. Though the complex narrative follows melancholic intertwining love stories, the four representative moments in Amalia’s cabinet are light-hearted, and includes an episode in which Myrtillo disguises as a nymph to pursue his beloved (fig. 1). Additionally, as I will show, specific items of clothing emblematic of gender throughout the four paints are used to emphasize themes of inversion of social power, discovery of noble identity, and continuation of dynastic lineage. Amalia had a unique position as consort to Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange, who was stadholder, captain-general of the army, and admiral of the navy: she did not have official duties but could informally influence state matters through consultation. My paper will explore the significance of displaying themes of empowerment through disguise and inversion in Amalia’s cabinet and its resonances with themes raised by “world upside down” and “women on top” imagery that show women inverting proscribed gender relations. Among this type of imagery are popular prints, proverbs, and theater repertoires of women battling for men’s trousers (*strijd om de broek*) or putting on their husband’s trousers as a metaphor for seizing power. It is my contention that such power of women imagery animates the *Il pastor fido* paintings. [See Appendix for images]

Image Appendix



Fig. 1 - Cornelis van Poelenburgh, *Amaryllis Crowning Myrtillo*, 1635, oil on canvas, 116.5 x 148.3 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.



Fig. 2 - Dirck van der Lisse, *Blind Man's Bluff*, 1635, oil on canvas, 117.3 x 142.5 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.



Fig. 3 - Herman Saftleven, and Hendrick Bloemaert, *Silvio and Dorinda*, 1635, oil on canvas, 118 x 141.7 cm, Jagdschloss Grunewald, Berlin.



Fig. 4 - Abraham Bloemaert, *The Marriage of Amaryllis and Myrtillo*, 1635, oil on canvas, 115.3 x 140.4 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.