

Cultural Materialism: gender bender

Gender works as an irrefutable power within society. An article in *Cosmopolitan* introduces the subject 'Dave' as transcending the power of gender. This essay will argue that the power of gender, both productive and repressive, operated in the 16th Century on Portia, the heroine of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, and continues to operate on Dave in the present. Using a cultural materialist approach, a combination of "historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis"(Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994, p.vii) will be utilised to examine how "forms of power both operated in the past and how they are replicated in the present" (Brannigan, 1998, p.6). Firstly gender and transgender must be defined.

For the purpose of this essay the terms gender and transgender must be defined.

Gender is defined as "sexual identity, especially in relation to society or culture.

The condition of being female or male; sex"(The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Transgender is defined as "appearing as, wishing to be considered as, or having undergone surgery to become a member of the opposite sex". (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000) The discursive power of gender may now be taken into account.

Gender is a discursive form of power. Klages (2001) states "for Foucault, a 'discourse' is a body of thought and writing united by a common object of study, a common methodology, and/or a set of common terms and ideas". Within a particular historical period societies understanding of sexuality is dependent on the discourse's circulating during that period. Moreover an individuals understanding of sex is dependant on the ideas, about sex, in circulation at any given time. As Smith states, "Sexuality cannot exist apart from being talked about. Sex may be biological, but

sexuality must be verbalised.” (1991, p.8). This discursive aspect of sex is usually referred to as gender. Sexuality and gender, to be masculine or feminine, are discursive. On the subject of power Brannigan (1998, p.51) cites Foucault in stating,

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body.

For Foucault to talk of discourse is to talk of power. Discursive power works both to repress and enable what, and how, the individual understands and talks about sexuality and gender within society. Power is discourse and discourse is power. (Kelleher, 2004). The discursive power of gender works productively for Portia, *The Merchant of Venice* and Dave in *Cosmopolitan*.

Portia's husband-to-be, Bassiano, is the reason Antonio has fallen into debt with Shylock. Portia is aware of this, “Before a friend of this description shall lose a hair through Bassiano's fault.”(Mahood, 1987, p.137). Portia decides that she must act, “I never did repent for doing good, nor shall not now”. One can argue Portia feels she has the right to be involved. When Bassiano reads of Antonio's fate, Portia states, “I am half yourself and I must freely have half of anything that this same paper brings you.” (Mahood, p.140) Portia thus forms a plan to save Antonio.

Portia's cross-dressing gives her the power to save Antonio's life. Portia can be seen to have agency to act, on behalf of Antonio, in court and thus save Antonio's life. Agency can be defined as “the person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Portia sends her servant Balthazar to fetch, “what notes and garments he doth give thee” (Mahood, 1987, p.141) from her cousin Doctor Bellario, a respected

scholar from Padua. Portia is aware that in order to enter court and defend Antonio she and Nerissa must assume the guise of male lawyers, “but in such habit that they shall think we are accomplished” (Mahood, 1987, p.141). Portia is aware that only as men can they succeed, “I have within my mind a thousand tricks of these bragging jacks, which I will practise.” (Mahood, 1987, p.142). Portia’s understanding of masculinity, what society deems is ‘manly’, enables her to subvert the discursive power of gender to her own needs. Cross-dressing as a male lawyer Portia assumes the physical appearance of a man. Combined with her store of masculine characteristics, in the eyes of the court, Portia is transformed into Balthazar, her male identity. Portia’s achievement of agency is the result of her cross-dressing. Portia subverts the discursive power of gender to save Antonio. Thus the journey to empowerment is achieved through cross-dressing. Dave also achieves empowerment through cross-dressing.

Dave the subject of Cosmopolitans article *I have a girlfriend but like to wear frocks* is empowered through cross-dressing. Dave has always wanted to dress as a woman, “I was five the first time I cross-dressed.” (Hobson, 2003, p.143). In the past Dave would feel guilty about his cross-dressing, “I suffered horrible guilt.” (Hobson, 2003, p.143). Dave points out he is not homosexual, “I just like the feminine image – accessories, clothes, make up – so much that I want to be a woman sometimes.” Dave finally decided to ‘come out’, “I knew I could no longer live a lie, and not being able to express my female side made me miserable.”. (Hobson, 2003, p.144) Dave’s store of feminine characteristics combined with cross-dressing enable him to create himself as a woman. Cosmopolitan’s article seems to suggest that Dave is empowered. Dave has an outlet for his feminine side ‘Katya’, “It’s just a natural side of him he has to express.”(Hobson, 2003, p.144) Cosmopolitan has recognised Dave as a

'transgenderist'. Cross-dressing enables Dave to express his feminine qualities publicly and thus become 'socially' accepted as member of the transgender community. Conversely discursive power works to also repress Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Portia's privileged status and knowledge are sufficient to enable her to pursue a legal defence of Antonio in the courtroom of Venice. Portia is a wealthy academic, of her wealth Bassiano states, "In Belmont is a lady richly left". (Mahood, 1987, pg.76) Moreover in a letter from "the learn'd Bellario"(Mahood, 1987, p.153) to the court introducing Balthazar, Portia's assumed guise, it states, "o'er many books together; he is furnished with my opinion which, bettered with his own learning, the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend". (Mahood, 1987, pg.153) Moreover Portia's skill as a lawyer is further evident when she turns Venetian law against Shylock in this statement, "The law hath yet another hold on you" (Mahood, 1987, pg.160). Portia has utilised the law not only to free Antonio but also ensnare Shylock. One may surmise Portia, as a woman, is a competent, capable lawyer. However, Portia must become a man to be allowed to practise in a court in Venice. As Belsey (1985, p.180) states,

Portia's right to exercise her authority depends on her lawyers robes, and the episode can be seen as making visible the injustice which allows woman authority only on condition that they seem to be men.

Cultural materialists consider the historical context of Shakespeare's production of *The Merchant of Venice* and woman's rights to practice law during the Elizabethan period.

Women in Elizabethan England were not permitted to practise law. In Australia women were only permitted as late as 1903 to practise law. As this speech by Justice M.A. McMurdo (1996) indicates

Ada Evans graduated in law from the University of Sydney in 1902 but as the New South Wales Women's Legal Status Act was not passed until 1921 she was not permitted to practise until then. Victoria's women lawyers' enabling Act was passed in 1903 and in 1905 Greta Flos Greig was admitted to practise. In Western Australia, no women were admitted until 1930 and in Tasmania the first female admission was in 1935.

Similarly concerning the English bar Johnson Lewis (2003) states,

In England a special tribunal of the House of Lords presided over by the Lord Chancellor decided in 1903 not to admit women to the English bar, on the grounds that there was no precedent and that they were not desirous of creating one.

One can assume that Elizabethan women were not permitted to practise law during the period of Shakespeare's life and production of *The Merchant of Venice*. An audience of the time would not have accepted Portia, as a woman, practising law in a courtroom. Feminists may argue that this is a consequence of a patriarchal dominated society. However, the fact remains that regardless of Portia's academic qualification and privileged status, a wealthy aristocrat, she is powerless to act because of her sex.

The discursive power of gender serves to oppress Portia. Portia is aware of the lack of power she has as a woman she states (Mahood, 1987, p.170)

So doth the greater glory dim the less: a substitute shines brightly as
a king until a king be by, and then his state empties itself

Portia is alluding to her ability to assume power as a 'man', but then she must return to being a powerless woman when returning to Bassanio, her husband. Moreover Portia is critical of gender's dividing practises, "O these naughty times puts bars between the owners and their rights!" (Mahood, 1987, p.125) Portia is conscious of the social ideals, the discursive power, of her gender oppressing her. She cannot own

herself. She is forced to become the 'property' of another; the husband as dictated by the will of her dead father, "so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." (Mahood, 1987, p.78) Portia's behaviour is thus suppressed. Because of her gender she can exercise limited power, agency. Only by assuming a masculine identity, can Portia attend court, exercise agency and save Antonio's life. Considering Dave, the transgenderist, one can make similar assumptions.

The discursive power of gender forces Dave to cross dress in order to reveal his feminine qualities. Dave considers himself a 'normal' man, "I work as a lawyer, captain my local footy team, and drink beer with mates." (Hobson, 2003, p.143). Dave might be considered a 'man's man'. However, Dave has admitted to being happy dressing as a girl. Dave does not exhibit his 'feminine' side during the normal course of his week. As a 'man' he cannot exhibit his feminine side, he must be masculine. Dave represses his femininity because of his personal image of what it is to be masculine, revealing his feminine qualities only through cross-dressing. Consequently Dave don's women clothing and represses his masculine attributes in order to appear feminine. The discursive power of gender serves to create Dave as two distinct identities. Dave both represses and produces behaviours because of societies views of what makes a man or woman, the masculine or feminine. Dave and Katya remain two separate identities because of society, thus Dave's, ideals of the characteristics that divide men and woman.

We have seen the power of gender subverted by both Dave and Portia but never transcended by either. Using a cultural materialist approach to uncover the power, unseen and irrefutable, of gender operating both productively, and repressively, in society within both Shakespeare's time and today. Both Dave and Portia have

subverted gender and in turn being subverted by gender. Power has both been productive and repressive and operates both currently and in the past.

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