

## “So . . . who are you now?": Performing Women in Stage Beauty's English Restoration

The 2004 film, *Stage Beauty*, set during the English Restoration, focuses on a male actor, Ned Kynaston, who specializes in portraying female roles and who receives much professional and personal validation for his performances. In the film, as in real life, King Charles II lifts the ban on women acting on the stage. Throughout the film, we see that Kynaston's personal identity is tied to his professional identity. He is a man who performs women—both on and off the stage. Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys described the real Ned Kynaston, upon whom the character is based, as “the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life” (qtd. in Haggerty 311). Because his identity is inextricably linked to his profession as a male actor of female roles, when women are allowed to take over the performance of those female stage characters, Ned suffers a crisis. If he is not the “loveliest lady” anymore, then who is he? Some viewers have an impulse to focus on whether Ned is gay, straight, or bisexual, or on analyzing whether the film ultimately promotes a conservative heteronormative agenda. While some of these discussions are certainly worthy of consideration, they seem to detract from how the film explores the process of constructing and deconstructing the performance

of gender. For me, the question isn't whether Ned's sexual preferences change or whether the film fails to fulfill its promise to represent other sexualities, and thereby cause "gender trouble." I see the film as offering Ned's journey as a visual narrative illustrating the deconstruction of his character's gender, one that has been constructed through what Judith Butler describes as "a stylized repetition of acts" (Chapter IV). Judith Butler says that:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . . [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (191)

Some viewers have criticized *Stage Beauty*, arguing that though "the film might be seen as Butlerian in its queering of gender roles and sexual identities"

(Berensmeyer 18), the conclusion ultimately reinforces a heteronormative view of gender. Ingo Berensmeyer writes that the film is "highly conventional" and:

highly conservative, since Kynaston's reintegration into human society, his re-introduction to the stage as a performer of male parts, and his 're-discovery' of his sexual identity as a man are only permitted to occur at the price of sacrificing his freely ranging bisexuality and submitting to a normative heterosexual regime. (18-19)

Though there are certainly reasons to be suspicious of the film's tendency to adhere to some Hollywood conventions, I believe that efforts to evaluate Ned's journey must take into account the fact that his beliefs and his social audience's beliefs are far removed from our own. The film's setting and the historical time period on which it is based can be viewed as a reversal of the heterosexual framework that informs Butler's world and work. Despite the differences between the world of the film and ours, I believe an application of Butler's theory of gender as performance can still yield great insight into the construction and deconstruction of Ned's identity.

Stage Beauty was adapted for the screen by playwright, Jeffrey Hatcher, who took his original play's title, *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, from the remarks of John Downes who wrote in 1660 that the real Kynaston "Made a Compleat Female Stage Beauty, performing his Parts so well . . . being Parts greatly moving Compassion and Pity; that it has since been Disputable among the Judicious, whether any woman that succeeded him so Sensibly touch'd the audience as he" (qtd. in Haggerty 313). Though *Stage Beauty* is unapologetically fictional, its main characters are all based on real historical figures that lived during England's Restoration. The protagonist, Ned Kynaston, was in reality one of the last male actors to specialize in portraying female characters on the English stage. Hatcher suggests that the lack of available information about the historical Ned Kynaston was an advantage in conceiving the story:

Actually, the fact that there are only bare facts is, I think, a great advantage. Because if we knew too much about the guy, then that would probably frustrate some of my dramatic license. I mean, he blazed bright as an actor and as a star for a couple of years. Then he was gone and back to playing supporting roles, so he doesn't get the theatre history treatment that a lot of more famous actors [receive] . . . I found that the information that was available was just enough, just tantalizing enough, to give me the bare bones and then I was able to build around it. (qtd. Murray)

And indeed, the film begins with Ned at the top of his field, a star dedicated to his craft and adored by his audiences. The dramatic question for Hatcher and in our film is: When King Charles II lifts the ban on women appearing on theater stages what happened to the careers of these famous male actors who specialize in portraying women? The film offers one possible scenario to answer that question. In order to explore the question, Hatcher creates a fictional character, Maria, Ned's dresser, whom he combines with Margaret Hughes, believed to have been the first female actor to legally appear on the English stage. Charles II's most well-known mistress, actress and folk hero Nell Gwynn, plays a pivotal role in the film, while real life Restoration rakes, George Villiers, the second Duke of Buckingham, and Sir Charles Sedley, a dramatist and patron of the arts, play

minor roles. Rounding out the main characters are actor and theater manager, Thomas Betterton, and Samuel Pepys, whose diaries serve as the most important primary sources for this time period.

Cursory research of the time period will reveal that Hatcher mined Pepys' diaries for many details about the real historical figures and time period. Ironically, the inclusion of authentic details has led some viewers to criticize its historical inaccuracies. Glaring differences between the historical record and the story should signal the viewer that despite its reliance on real figures and events, the movie isn't meant to be seen as a historically accurate chronicle. For example, Gwynn would've been about 10 years old in 1660 when women were allowed on the stage and in reality, was already an established actress before she became Charles II's mistress. As was the case with other boys that portrayed female characters, the real Ned Kynaston was probably around 17 years old, and not a 30-something-year old man like actor Billy Crudup who plays him. In the film, Charles II not only gives women permission to act on the stage, but then also goes on to ban men from playing the female roles, a fabricated event. In focusing on these historical inaccuracies and anachronisms, some viewers have found cause to criticize some of the larger themes of the film, especially with regard to its treatment of gender issues. But *Stage Beauty* is a nesting box of time periods and genres. It is a 2004 film adapted from a 1999 play, about the theater world in 1660, where performances of Shakespeare's 1603 play *Othello* feature heavily. Every one of these time periods and genres is viewed through the refracting lenses of the others, and as such, it would be difficult to trace definitively where history, theater, film, and the modern world begin and end. One critic's comments remind us that a film about a historical time period will always be filtered through the lens of our modern world when she says that the film's director, Richard Eyre, "captures the mood of late 17th century London, or at least what we want to believe that mood was like, with his colorfully dappled mix of characters" (Zacharek). Even though the historical distance and multiple genres can create obstacles for the modern film to explore gender and identity, I believe that they also offer opportunities. If the film creates a version of "what we want to believe

that mood was like,” understanding the time period and its revolutionary shift in popular views of women and men on the stage may still provide insight into the filmmakers’ representation of Ned and the forces at work in his world.

We know that for centuries the Church’s attitude toward the theater was characterized by ambivalence. Though it was not averse to didactic theatrical pageants, it was also suspicious of the theater because audiences might be negatively influenced by the innate hypocrisy of the dramatic arts (Maus 606). According to Katherine Eisaman Maus, clerical anxiety about the theater was directly related to distrust of female sexuality:

In the middle ages and the Renaissance, antitheatricalists and antifeminists strike exactly the same notes again and again, so that suspicion of the theater and suspicion of female sexuality can be considered two manifestations of the same anxiety. . . . The Renaissance antitheatricalists are profoundly suspicious of the necessarily insincere quality of all play-acting. They refuse to regard the theatrical pretense in the light of an innocent fiction, because they do not recognize fictions as innocent. (603-604)

Katarzyna Bronk’s essay, “The Act(who)ress—The Female Monster of the Seventeenth-Century English Stage,” explains that this dual distrust of the “play-acting” of the theater and what was believed to be women’s inherently deceptive nature made it unthinkable for women to be allowed on the stage:

The reasons female bodies were excluded from theatrical endeavour since the medieval times were mostly religious in nature. Paradoxically, the anti-female discourse of the early Church explained the necessity of such occlusion with the argument that women are dissimulators—that is deceptive actors—in real life, and allowing them to display this to the bigger public was potentially dangerous. . . . The words of any woman due to her biblical, sinful ancestry, were dissimulating, aimed at seduction and enticement to sin: hence the scriptural message which was to be delivered from the medieval stage was never to be as effective as when uttered by the representatives of the reasonable, ontologically higher being, that is the

man. A woman on stage would serve as a bodily conduit of sin, ready to contaminate the God-fearing audience. (2)

If the theological argument were insufficient, it was also thought to be antithetical to “proper womanly behavior” to display her body in public spaces, the realm of prostitutes and other fallen women:

A proper woman was to be confined to the four walls of households or convents to practise the virtues of humility, meekness, silence, chastity and unconditional obedience to the masculine protector. . . Men, the more reasonable and more talented of the sexes, took over not only the right to create the perfect woman in actuality—by fashioning her according to precepts of appropriate femininity—but also the privilege to signify femininity in theatrical representations. (Bronk 2-3)

Medieval and Renaissance actors learned “how to act out femininity, not how to be a woman,” based on male conceptions of what women ought to be (Bronk 3). During the reign of King Charles I (1600-1649), the prohibition on women actors was tested when a French theater company that included women performed in London:

Theatregoers were at once fascinated and horrified at the sight of women performing on stage. The Puritans were outraged at such an affront to their religious sensibilities. The conservatives were aghast at the intrusion of a foreign idea so contrary to established tradition. Although there were those who saw no wrong in such an idea, for the majority it was too soon—contemporary [sic] reports tell of their being booed and “pippin-pelted” from the stage and the whole company hastily retreated back to France. (Gillan)

This attitude toward women and the theater continued until Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. He reopened the theaters that the Puritan-led government had closed for 18 years in an effort to crack down on the types of excesses and frivolities that were associated with the monarchy. When the theaters reopened, theater companies continued the centuries-old practice of employing boy actors to play the female roles. Though the boy-actors of the late sixteenth

and early seventeenth centuries aimed at more verisimilitude in playing the women's roles than they had in earlier years, "in theatre gender behaviour was still 'ritualised and codified'" (Bronk 3). Stage Beauty takes great pains to depict Ned Kynaston's acting style as highly stylized and artificial, based on years of theatrical training on how to act a woman, a compliant, submissive, and feminine woman.

In the first scene of the film, Ned is on the stage portraying Desdemona who is being murdered by Othello. Making no attempt at offering a lifelike impersonation of women, Ned performs Desdemona as the picture of submissive femininity. Elizabeth Gruber, who analyzes the film's stage versions of Othello, says: "When the actor playing Othello raises the pillow to smother him, Ned displays an exaggerated non-resistance. His Desdemona does not so much surrender to death as welcome it" (230). Director Richard Eyre, a former director of the UK's National Theater, explains that though Ned's acting style was created for the film, it was inspired by illustrations of stage movements from the sixteenth century:

I dug up a book I'd read about 25 years ago—Elizabethan Acting by BL Joseph—which argued that it is folly to imagine that Shakespeare's actors were much less concerned with truthfulness of feeling than the actors of our day. However, they showed their feeling in an extroverted and demonstrative way. Their acting displayed a poetry of movement, made up of gestures and physical attitudes in which ideally, as Hamlet advised, the action was suited to the word. These actions are illustrated in Joseph's book by 16th-century drawings of a repertoire of hand movements then in use on the stage—not an acting manual but drawn from observation. We borrowed many of the gestures to concoct a syntax of acting that could be read by candlelight: graphic, very stylized, mannered, elegant, out front. ("A World Like Any" par. 4)

Modern audiences accustomed to a more naturalistic style of acting might feel distanced from this stylized, elegant, and obviously artificial acting style. However, when Ned finishes the scene he receives a standing ovation from his audience, and with a graceful hand gesture motions politely for the audience to allow the play to continue. Despite the ovation, Ned complains about

performance directly afterwards: “Something eludes me. A gesture, a tone. You know what, Tommy? I’m dying too soon” (Stage Beauty). Later in the film, when Maria asks him why he never plays men, Ned admits that he’s enamored with the beauty of women:

Men aren’t beautiful. What they do isn’t beautiful either. Women do everything beautifully, especially when they die. Men feel far too much. Feeling ruins the effect. Feeling makes it ugly. Perhaps that’s why I could never pull off the death scene. I . . . could never feel it . . . in a way that . . . wouldn’t mar the . . . I couldn’t let the beauty die. Without beauty, there’s nothing. Who could love that? (Stage Beauty)

His acting style and attitude clearly reflect the distorted view of women that characterized theater representations of his and previous eras, of “real” women as feminine, beautiful, and submissive.

Shortly after Charles II reopens the English theaters, he also lifts the ban on women on the stage. As a result, Ned’s dresser, Maria, who has secretly been nursing a desire to perform, is allowed to audition for a role. Ned is horrified at the thought that an untrained woman’s performance could compare with his own. In an argument with Maria, Ned refers to his childhood training to illustrate why he is more qualified than she is to play the female roles:

Ned: Please. Just a question, as you are quite obviously going to audition today. Do you know the Five Positions of Feminine Subjugation?

Maria: What?

Ned: The Five Positions of Feminine Subjugation? No? Or perhaps you’re more acquainted with the Pose of Tragic Acceptance? Or the Demeanour of Awe and Terror?

Maria: Mr. Kynaston . . .

Ned: The Supplicant’s Clasp? Or the Attitude of Prostrate . . . Funny, you’ve seen me perform them a thousand times.

Maria: (Stamps her foot.) Mr. Kynaston!

Ned: Now, there’s a feminine gesture. You seem to have managed the Stamp of Girlish Petulance.

Maria: I just wanted to act. I just wanted to do what you do.

Ned: But, madam, I have worked half of my life to do what I do. When I trained, I was not permitted to wear a woman's dress for three years. I was not permitted to wear a wig for four, not until I had proved that I had eliminated every masculine gesture, every masculine intonation from my very being. What teacher did you have? What cellar was your home?

Maria: I had no teacher, nor such a classroom. But then, I had less need of training. (Stage Beauty)

The scene underscores a number of important themes in the play. In the first place, it illustrates again that Ned's acting style, indeed, his performance of women is based on the ritualized and highly stylized training that had been a staple for female impersonators on the stage. Each of the "positions" he names suggests simplistic and reductive conceptions of female behavior. It is no coincidence that Ned focuses on female subjugation in particular, as his performance of Desdemona demonstrates that in his view, ideally, women remain passive. The scene also illustrates that Ned's formative years, his source for the "stylized repetition of acts" that formed his conceptions of stage gender, were drilled into him by a tutor—his substitute family—rehearsed until he conformed to the expectations of his social audience, not just on the stage but in life. Butler's discussion of the family's role in the "punishment and reward" system is instructive here. She relies on the comparison to an actor's rehearsal of a script: I don't mean to minimize the effect of certain gender norms which originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward . . . they are rarely, if ever, radically original. The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. ("Performative Acts")

In the case of Ned, as we'll see, the performance of gender on the stage and off the stage are conflated, in large part because in his life the two are hardly

distinguishable. His tutor rewarded feminine behavior and punished masculine behavior until he could reproduce it not just for the stage, but also as a representation of his being. Interestingly, the “reward” was permission to don feminine garb, and implicitly, the promise of approval and maybe even love. In another scene, Ned recalls with fondness the tutor who raised and trained him:

This pillow was given to me by my old tutor who found me in the gutter. He gave me a home. He gave us all a home, pretty boys like me. He taught us to read. He taught us Shakespeare, all the tricks and turns and . . . He gave this to me the first time I played Desdemona. “And remember,” he’d say, “the part doesn’t belong to an actor. An actor belongs to a part. Never forget. You’re a man in woman’s form.” Or was it the other way round?  
(Stage Beauty)

His confusion recollecting his tutor’s words demonstrate that he’s become unable to disentangle his real-life identity from his stage life.

As much as the clerics and anti-theatricalists had been resistant to seeing women on the stage, Ned’s confusion about where his gender performance begins and ends highlights another societal anxiety—the feminizing effect of men portraying female characters might have on both the actors and their audiences. The film’s fictionalized Charles II also alludes to this anxiety when Ned implores him to allow him to continue playing the women’s roles. Charles replies to Ned: “Balance the scales, Kynaston, give the girls a chance. Besides . . . it’s a sop to the Church. Priests always preach about boys playing women. They say it leads to effeminacy and sodomy. Well, they’d know, they’re priests” (Stage Beauty). In reality, by the end of the Renaissance the practice of using boy/men-actors in the women’s roles was losing its appeal, especially as it was suspected of nurturing homosexuality, not just among the boy actors, but also in their male audiences:

Their blurring of gender roles evoked anxiety among those who believed in a clear separation of sexes. Moralists and anti-theatricalists, with William Prynne and his *Histriomastix* (1633) in the vanguard, began to insist on adulteration of such performers’ gender, and, as they thought, the actors’ inevitable homosexuality. The moralists of the stage pointed to the

simultaneous corruption of the audience, particularly its male part, by homoerotic impersonations. (Bronk 3)

Though some might argue that a causal relationship between performing women and homosexuality is fallacious, historical records hint that the real Kynaston had sexual relations with other men even though he also did eventually marry (Haggerty 315). What's more important is the larger picture of society that is depicted in the film. Restoration society, in particular the upper classes and the theater world, did not necessarily adhere to a binary view of gender. In King Charles II's court, sexual polymorphism was "boasted of as an accomplishment" (Selenick 289), so that Kynaston's behavior, in real life or in the film, would hardly be considered an aberration or a source of "gender trouble." According to George E. Haggerty, author of "'The Queen was not shav'd yet': Edward Kynaston and the Regendering of the Restoration Stage," Kynaston's "willingness to enjoy sexual intimacy with other actors is a matter of tradition . . . like various freewheeling libertines and other licentious types, including actors, no amount of same-sex dalliance seems capable of labeling anyone definitively with a sexual identity" (315). In one scene, two aristocratic female fans ask Ned to accompany them on a ride through the park and request that he remain dressed as a woman. Sir Charles Sedley happens upon the group and mistakes them for prostitutes. Insulted, the two women leave in a huff. Sedley gropes Ned and discovers what Ned calls his "guardian at the gates." Undeterred, Sedley says to Ned, "I'm in the market for a mistress. A male one might be just the thing" (*Stage Beauty*).

Gruber says the scene "underscores the artifice or orchestration of femininity. That is, the film presents gender as a fluid set of signs rather than a fixed system anchored by immutable biological difference" (231). In the world of the film, as in the Restoration, gender is not fixed to biology, nor is Ned's performance as a woman, on stage or off, treated as taboo by his immediate social world.

Hatcher chooses to include several scenes that demonstrate the actor's sexual polymorphism. Early in the film, George Villiers surprises Kynaston in a bed on the stage. From the exchange, one can surmise that the two men have had previous sexual encounters. As he puts a long blond wig on Ned, Villiers says,

“Put this on, will you? I like to see a golden flow as I die in you.” Ned replies, “Would you ask your lady whores to wear a wig to bed?” to which Villiers says, “If it made them more a woman” (Stage Beauty). The connection between Ned’s stage performance as a woman and his desirability to Villiers is underscored by another scene later in the film. When Ned has been displaced by female actors and is unemployed, he approaches Villiers coquettishly in a bathhouse, this time clothed as a man. Villiers informs Ned that he’s getting married and Ned inquires about their sex life:

Ned: What’s she like in bed? What’s she like . . . to kiss? Does she wear a golden flow as you die in her? Or don’t you know?

Villiers: I don’t want you! Not as you are now. I . . . when I did spend time with you, I . . . always thought of you as a woman. When we were in bed, it was always in a bed on stage. I’d think, “Here I am, in a play . . . inside Desdemona.” Cleopatra, poor Ophelia . . . You’re none of them now. I don’t know who you are. I doubt you do. (Stage Beauty)

First Ned’s tutor, then Villiers and Sedley, provide positive reinforcement for Ned’s feminine gender performance. Villiers’ attitude also clearly demonstrates that he’s more interested in a fiction than in Ned himself.

Hatcher resists attempts to define or label Kynaston’s sexuality and instead, focuses on Ned’s willingness to perform whatever role will bring him the adoration he craves:

So much of the time these days people want to pigeonhole and say homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, what have you. . . . The fact that he has sex with men and with women, I suppose simply by the definition of the act makes him bisexual. . . . Whomever will worship him. Whomever will give him the time of day, frankly, he’ll be whatever that person needs him to be. And if it’s the women in the coach or if it’s the Duke or someone else, that’s where he goes. (Stage Beauty)

When the new “actresses” take Ned’s place at the theater, Ned loses his adoring audience and finds himself unable to make the transition to playing male roles on the stage. A debased and inebriated Ned is relegated to singing in drag on a

makeshift stage in a tavern where the audiences may be of a lower class, but supply him with the attention he requires.

As Ned's fortunes decline, Maria's rise, and soon she finds herself star. Bronk writes that in reality, "When the first actresses appeared, moralists were disconcerted but not shocked" (4). It was actually initially hoped by some that "the presence of women on the stage would eliminate the obscene and corrupt aspects of the English drama, and encourage the adoption of purer standards for theatrical spectacle" (Maus 597). In fact, theater companies employing female actors were given patents with the express condition that "no . . . play shall be acted . . . containing any passages offensive to piety or good manners" (Maus 598). The implied threat was never carried out and Restoration dramas, in part because of the presence of real women on the stage became even more sexually explicit and subversive than in previous years. While one might believe that allowing women to act reflected a liberalizing effect in society for women, ironically, the outcome was quite different. As the title of Bronk's essay implies, actresses would soon come to be associated with prostitutes. Not surprisingly, male actors still outnumbered the women and were paid better. Evidence also suggests that during the second half of the seventeenth century women were losing opportunities for participation in public life and that men made headways into traditionally female occupations such as "brewing, textile manufacture, dressing, and midwifery" (Maus 600). *Stage Beauty* chooses not to focus on these elements of the historical predicament of the first actresses, though the lack of training that Ned bemoans is reflected in the historical accounts for much the same reason that Ned points out—it was not believed that actresses could not possibly know how to portray female characters properly. Bronk writes about the paradox inherent in Restoration attitudes toward women on the stage:

The idea of female performers seemed natural because, after all, "the notion of women as natural performers, by nature hypocrites", "false at the level of the profound heart" was common knowledge. Anti-feminist discourse popularized the idea that "[a]cting is role-playing, role-playing is lying, lying is a woman's game". Women were, after all, an inherently theatrical

and duplicitous sex with temperaments prone to change and inconstancy. By nature, by definition even, they were “a lying sign” so the stage was, indeed, their natural habitat. However, they still needed proper education to perform what Ferris terms “man’s imagined women” on the stages . . . female performers needed schooling from men . . . Educating actresses on proper, that is man-designed femininity, necessitated various means and ways. (4)

Despite Maria’s observation that she doesn’t need tutoring on how to perform a woman, Ned’s view is clearly indicative of the times. She could not possibly be a proper woman on the stage without instruction from a man. Before the film ends, Ned does end up tutoring Maria. Critics have complained not only of the misogynistic overtones in this turn of events, but also because the previously sexually ambiguous Ned becomes the “man” to take on the task. Though the criticisms are certainly valid, to change the story would be to ask the filmmakers to shirk from portraying this world accurately so that our own beliefs might be reflected. And though we might question whether Ned or others like him can teach a woman how to be feminine, it is not far-fetched to see that a seasoned and well-trained actor might have some wisdom to impart to a novice.

The film doesn’t fit neatly into classic dramatic categories of tragedy and comedy, but at this point, Ned fulfills the role of tragic hero quite nicely. He has fallen from his perch at the top of his field. He fails to convincingly portray a male character, fails to convince the king to reverse his order banning men from performing the women’s parts, and fails to rekindle his relationship with Villiers. Ned’s tragic flaw is classical—by insulting women actors, his own hubris led him to alienate Nell Gwynn who has the king’s ear. But his hubris masks a deeper flaw. His social audience had determined Ned’s identity, an identity that is tied directly to his profession. When he loses that profession, he loses his identity. Exhibiting confusion throughout the film, when Villiers suggests that Ned doesn’t know who he is, he has no reply. His lack of self-awareness and his deeply rooted confusion about his identity come to a head in a pivotal scene between Ned and Maria. The two end up in a bed together—not on the stage—in a small cabin in a

bucolic setting where she's taken him to dry out. Maria asks him what men do with men:

Ned: Well, it depends.

Maria: On?

Ned: On who's the man and who's the woman.

Maria: But I said men with men.

Ned: Yes, yes, I know, but with, er . . . men and women, there's a man and there's a woman, and my experience has been that it's the same with men and men.

Maria: Were you the man or the woman?

Ned: (in falsetto) I was the woman.

Maria: That means?

Ned: Right. Er, it . . . um, in the saddle.

(Cut to scene: Maria sits atop Ned who is lying face down in the bed.)

Maria: So am I the man now or the woman?

Ned: You're the man.

Maria: And you're the woman?

Ned: Yes.

Maria: There isn't much to do.

Ned: Not with what we're given.

(Cut to scene: Ned lies on top of Maria who is face down in the bed.)

Maria: So, who am I now?

Ned: Er, you're the man . . . Er, you're the woman!

Maria: (laughs) And you're?

Ned: I'm the man. Or so I assume. Seldom get up here. Quite a view.

Maria: But I'm . . . I'm the man-woman?

Ned: Yes. You're the man-woman?

(Cut to scene: Ned lies atop Maria who is lying face up in the bed.)

Maria: And what am I now?

Ned: I . . . You're the woman.

Maria: Still?

Ned: Yes. (Maria puts one leg around his back and slowly turns him until he's lying with his back on the bed and she is above him.)

Maria: And now what am I? (She kisses him.)

Ned: The woman.

Maria: (Kissing.) And now?

Ned: The woman.

Maria: And you are?

Ned: The man. (The scene becomes more passionate and looks like it will turn to sex.) Tell me something.

Maria: Anything!

Ned: How do you die?

Maria: What?

Ned: As Desdemona. How do you die? (Maria stops kissing him and leaves the bed.) Oh, no, I'm sorry . . . I wanted . . .

Maria: Your old tutor did you a great disservice, Mr. Kynaston. He taught you how to speak and swoon and toss your head, but he never taught you to suffer like a woman or love like a woman. He trapped a man in woman's form and left you there to die! I always hated you as Desdemona. You never fought! You just died beautifully! No . . . no woman would, would, die like that, no matter how much she loved him! A woman would fight!  
(Stage Beauty)

The scene encapsulates multiple themes that have been interwoven throughout the film. For one, in Ned's instructions on what men do together, his confusion about who the man is and who the woman is echo his earlier confusion when he recalls his tutor's instructions about performing women on the stage. For Ned, sex with men is just another performance. The scene also indicates that in a moment of possible emotional intimacy, he is still self-absorbed and preoccupied with performing women. Throughout the film, Maria has struggled to find herself as an actor, basically imitating Ned's performances in her own. When she goes on stage, she is a woman playing a man who is playing a woman. And yet in this moment, she has her own epiphany underscoring Ned's lack of self-awareness

or understanding of what it means to perform a woman. His whole identity has been tied to the performance of the “stylized repetition of acts” that were part and parcel of his formative years. Stripped of his professional identity, this interaction with Maria forces Ned to see that his performance of gender has been based on theatrical conventions that were in turn based on masculine fantasies and misconceptions of femininity.

At the end of the film, Ned and Maria are forced to play Othello and Desdemona together. In contrast to the highly stylized and artificial acting style we’ve seen earlier in the play, the film attributes to them a naturalistic (and anachronistic) style of acting—the not so subtle point being that they’re each finally playing an “authentic” man and woman. Ned abandons the earlier artifice of his performances and plays an intimidating Othello. Instead of imitating Ned dying beautifully, Maria’s Desdemona puts up a valiant fight. The shock value for their theater audience, and for film viewers, of seeing Desdemona fight while Othello smothers her provides a true contrast to the versions we’ve seen earlier. Ned and Maria take their bows to thunderous applause. The two exhilarated actors meet privately backstage where Ned remarks that he finally got the death scene right. They kiss, first passionately then tenderly. Maria says to him, “So . . . who are you now?” Ned smiles and replies, “I don’t know. I don’t know” (Stage Beauty).

I understand why some critics felt let down by the film. It appears that for Ned to recover from the loss of his profession he must abandon his “freely ranging bisexuality,” learn how to perform masculinity, and choose a heterosexual relationship. Berensmeyer acknowledges the appeal the film might have for “Butlerians and Shakespeareans” before expressing his disappointment in its conclusion:

Theatrical performances, with their scripted patterns of enabling constraint and their highly artificial and artful codes of production and reception, mirror and expose the constraining and equally non-natural codes of social and cultural performativity outside the theater. But one might also register some concern about the glibness and superficial ease with which Stage

Beauty handles these negotiations of gender and power . . . by defusing the fascinating and challenging ambiguities of its protagonist in a conventional “Hollywood ending” and in a “historicising” aesthetics of spectacle that conforms to the visual standards of contemporary mainstream cinema as much as it corresponds to conventional moral standards of heteronormative sexuality. (26)

Yes—Stage Beauty is a Hollywood movie and as such, adheres to some of its conventions. But I can’t completely agree with Berensmeyer for two reasons: the social and cultural codes in the Restoration world of the film are not necessarily analogous to our own and I believe the conclusion is ambiguous. Judith Butler says that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (“Performative Acts” 520), but the taboos of this world, in both the world of the film and for the real historical Restoration actors, are different from ours. For Ned to perform women off the stage was not taboo.

Ultimately, I don’t see the conclusion as a traditional Hollywood ending because we don’t actually learn what happens to our protagonists. We don’t know whether they will end up together and we don’t know what direction Ned will go. And yet, I find the conclusion hopeful. Ned’s smile and his admission of uncertainty suggest both growing self-awareness and possibility. These traits strike me as consistent with what Butler says about subversive performances:

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (“Performing Gender” 531)

Ned’s admission that he doesn’t know who he is seems to signal a break from the past and from those continuous acts that had previously formed the basis of his gender performance. Perhaps some would see my analysis of the film as reflecting a misreading of Butler, because I am not interpreting “gender trouble” as necessarily subversive of a heterosexual framework. Instead, I am interpreting a performance as subversive when it resists the pressures responsible for the societal

framework, but also, when one develops an awareness of one's place within it. Ultimately, I see more power in the admission of ignorance than in the declaration of certainty, whatever certainty that may be.

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