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A Study of the Transvestite(s) Demasculinized in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Princess"

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I

The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines the word 'Transvestism' as "the practice of wearing clothing appropriate to the opposite sex, often as a manifestation of sexuality" (1397). Three things should not escape the readers' eye before inferring its meaning in Tennyson's poem. First, the act of "practice" induces an act of habit which also engages in the act of repetition. Essentially, the word practice *creates* in the habituated a sense of pleasure somewhere, which proceeds by being voluntary at first, and transforms itself into an involuntary pleasure upon deliberations. I do not suggest that practice cannot be discontinued, or that it might not yield displeasure. On the contrary, I strive to demonstrate why the act of "practice" is cyclical in general and in particular. Secondly, Transvestism, which is often limited to the man dressing himself in a woman's attire, gains an equivocal benefit from the meaning provided by the lexicon- something that I shall work upon in detail with *The Princess* in perspective. Lastly and most importantly, I emphasize not on the "sexuality" of any of the characters in this long verse poem; instead, penetrative focus on the various meanings (or lack of it) of the word "manifest" (from its original Latin *Manifestus*, meaning clarity) reveals how this thoroughly ambiguous word defines the larger ideologies and its illusive presence all throughout the versenovel.

My manner of dealing with the question of manifestation is different than the usual deciphering of its meaning. The question "What does the poem manifest?" is substituted in this critique by "What is manifested when the poem

no longer exists?” As the question demands, I shall not expatiate upon what the transvestites signify in this poem; my answer shall focus upon what it is to suffer from the loss or gain of gender (specifically, male sexuality) which, as I opine, is more philosophical than specific to the poem. In the Prologue to *The Princess*, Tennyson begins with a Romantic limning which has similar implications:

‘Take Lilia, then, for heroine,’ clamor’d he,
 And *make* her some great princess, six feet high,
 Grand, epic, homicidal; and be you
 The prince to win her. (135, ll. 217-220, italics mine)

The internal rhyme in the first two lines signify the act of procuring and creating in succession. On a larger canvas, it might identify with the fact that there is no natural “heroine” but one to be procured and created suitably. The question naturally goes backwards further—assuming that a heroine is a construct, is Lilia a woman that can be “taken” for granted, or simply improvised upon what characterizes as “womanly” in her? This is not speculation, for Tennyson ends the line with the masculine “he”, which means the “womanly” is always alongside the “manly”, and the “heroine” taken is a “hero” taken too.

As I began by saying, the question of manifestation is not what belongs to the poem. It is more worthwhile to dwell upon what man-infestation is in scenarios where there are no men in the making but women, theoretically. When H.W. Longfellow comments on “a discordant note somewhere” (164) in this poem, I think we have identified the discordance. The discordance is furthered by the dismissive use of “some” in the next line, and that too beside the culturally significant word “great”. Either the culture of greatness is sham, or a princess being great too often, no longer is. If that “some great princess” were “grand, epic, homicidal”, then she is a by-product at once of fiction, of stereotype and of public fancy created beyond the individual. Is not the princess gender-neutral then, as the poem seems to suggest?

It is not so—at least not in the manner in which I want Transvestism to be understood as the critique progresses. By using the term “gender-neutral”, I do not imply the absence of gender, but the even and proportionate presence of both genders in such a way that one disqualifies the other. It helps explain Tennyson’s frequent use of “half” all throughout the poem, as Eileen Tess Johnston rightly points out.¹ The fourth line of the section quoted creates not so much a prince, but a victor. Naturally, the other “half” is the relinquished half, and so are its adjectives disqualified and re-appropriated, although we cannot completely be sure of this. This, for Johnston, qualifies the poem for a “medley” where although we know that the prince wins the princess or the hero lurks without the heroine, we can never know self-assuredly what each gender fighting the war qualifies as in terms of an individual: “self-sufficiency

be it biological, imaginative or spiritual is an imperfect ideal; interdependence is the condition of life, and its recognition is life-giving” (561). The woman as princess or the man as prince is anything but a gendered being.

In Part I of *The Princess*, the readers come across the first “thought” acted upon by the prince and his friends in order to win Princess Ida primarily:

A thought flash’d thro’ me which I clothed in act,
 Remembering how we three presented Maid
 ... We sent mine host to purchase female gear;
 He brought it, and himself, a sight to shake
 The midriff of despair with laughter, (139-40, ll. 193- 99)

The actions are stifling. First, the prince “clothed” his act of thought, implying that the objective of action involves nothing that challenges the codes of accepted etiquette. Secondly, his action is not the performance but the repetition of a performed action, hinting at his awareness of the consequences that *could* follow as a result. The third is an open-ended act—why would they laugh at the “sight”, and what are they laughing at exactly—the individual, the memory of the action or the action itself of dressing once again in a woman’s raiment? Paul Turner’s observation is pertinent in this situation: “The Prince plays only a supporting role, and the admirable side of her (Ida’s) character is deliberately high-lighted by exaggerating the feebleness of his” (105). This, in the context of the poem, would suggest that they are laughing at themselves—their own feebleness, but it answers half the question. It also explains why despair and laughter coincide, and why it is the mid-riff that shakes. What I think as an alternative concern is the lack of significance that they attach with the opposite gender, and consequently with themselves. If “female gear” procured would familiarize them with the feminine, then surely, they were never masculine enough to shake off their unmanifested maleness either. This originates at the beginning of Part II of the poem where Ida is introduced in a Shakespearean manner:

There at a board by tome and paper sat,
 With two tame leopards’ couch’d beside her throne,
 All beauty compassed in a female form,
 The Princess; liker to the inhabitant
 Of some clear planet close upon the sun
 Than our man’s earth; (141, ll. 18-23)

I could jokingly suggest that the Princess is Venusian. From a cursory reading, the conclusion would hint at the fact that the stereotypical gender roles are reversed. Much as it might delight some admirers of the poem, it is far from it. To begin with, “her throne”, as the poet suggests—its decorative and overall adjectival value, likens the “beauty” more with power. The “two

tame leopards” are symbolic of power tamed in order to represent beauty, but the throne is masculine to the utmost degree, and if she were to use the tamed power to heighten her own sovereignty, it should make her more powerful, not more beautiful as the verse lines fool us into conjecturing. What we have now is a masculine female on a male throne resembling a man, a “liker”. This is interesting because contrary to the poem’s prologue, we have, critically speaking, a quest where a man is not attempting to court a woman, but a transvestite determined to win over a man or a manly woman, and in the process of becoming a higher man, allow the subjugated manly woman to *create* femininity in her.² This disturbs Donald E. Hall who, as I believe, can prophesy the covert future of such an expression: “Tennyson answers that men will continue to speak for women and can even be relied upon to bring about changes that will benefit both sexes” (56). Here at least, one can evince nothing of this kind unless the poem is read this way; either the man administrates, or the manly—sometimes the female, but never the feminine.

What I propose as my theoretical position has equivocal standards, though I believe the general remarks are neat. The ambiguity arises in wrongfully assuming the prince’s seizures as a medical condition understood so by most critics. Cyril, in a conversation with Florian confesses to a condition not easily apprehensible:

do I chase
The substance or the shadow? Will it hold?
I have no sorcerer’s malison in me,
No ghostly hauntings like his Highness. I
Flatter myself that always everywhere
I know the substance when I see it. (150, ll. 386-91)

The two questions asked by Cyril challenge the validity of at least two planes of consciousness. The first question is a philosophical pursuit of the mental condition, but the second is a pursuit of the material and its mental manifestation. What is interesting is, in midst the serious pursuit of both questions, the resultant middle path for Cyril is humour that embodies irony, sarcasm and a certain darkness that I cannot concretely define. This is of prime interest because Cyril’s reference to the Prince’s seizures is not medical, but touches upon elements of materialism and immaterialism, magic, the paranormal and the perceptive. The syncretism of all these, I argue, is how a seizure can be more imaginatively defined in the course of this poem. Barbara Herb Wright oversimplifies this when she believes that during a seizure, “he remains a participant in, and an observer of, the split between objective and subjective realities” (68). It does not explain why an observer “seizes” the split or why he transcends the seizure. The Prince’s seizure is not so much an illness as it is the transcendence from one state to another, and its heaviest consequences

are in the department of gender creation. Florian’s love for Lady Blanche could be one such instance where contrary to the other ‘created’ genders in the poem, the feminine gender is made available to him:

An open-hearted maiden, true and pure.
If I could love, why this were she. How pretty
Her blushing was, and how she blush’d again,
As if to close with Cyril’s random wish!
Not like your Princess cramm’d with erring pride
Nor like poor Psyche whom she drags in tow. (Part III, ll. 81-86, my emphasis)

The phrasing is downright of value since it begins in the present, identifying the virginal model of the woman and its larger moral implications to begin with. Almost immediately, it suspends itself to the faculty of possession—a prime example of the Transvestite coming to terms with the demands of the opposite sex. The transcendental values that Transvestism had allowed him now determines the sexual reality it best chooses to adopt and adapt with. The present paves way for the future, and it treasures the past which he wants as an act of repetition. The sense of possession gives him the impulse for a conjugal relationship which “becomes a literal growth towards a oneness which does not obliterate difference” (60), as James R. Kincaid rightly points out. It must be brought to light that this is the easiest of such Transvestal realizations since it places the woman in a buffer zone where the Princess is a man and Lady Psyche too feminine even for a female. In that way, Florian’s gender is not as much created as it is improvised into creation — one among the many one finds in this verse epic.

I shall digress here a little. What I argue in favour of both Transvestism and transcendence engages the man demasculinizing or demasculinized. It is by no means similar to what I define by Transvestism. Demasculinizing is one form of Transvestism no doubt, but Transvestism in its proper moral function is transcendental—something that either gender roles renounced cannot be equated with. The digression this time is in favour of the feminine (or the female?) and their ratification of the moral role of the child:

O-children-there is nothing upon Earth
More miserable than she that has a son
And sees him err. (157, ll. 243-45)

I emphasize here the child because in the schema of a demasculinized transvestite trying to feminize the lady and re-masculinize, the woman is father of the offspring. The “Earth” was a metaphor introduced as fatherly in a previous section, and the pun on “son” in the second line intimates the presence of both genders symbolically. Alisa Clapp-Itnyre is right in identifying the children as “less bodies than symbols of women’s creative capacity” (240). Also interesting is the way the child’s moral failure is unconsciously attributed

to his gender; it could signify that the male child is born amoral, only to explore the possibilities of redefining his gender through a transcendental experience. This is a breakthrough because the male is a mistaken gender if analyzed critically—it can un-err only upon the mother being fatherly during his moral experience till the father can prolong his masculinity post its man-infestation.

One last point requires to be made before I conclude the first section of this essay. Duly understood, *The Princess* is a poem on the necessity of education among the women, but how much does the female identify either with the feminine or with the masculine in the long run? In Part III of the poem, an anticipated opinion is finally blurted out by Ida herself:

No doubt we *seem* a kind of monster to you;
We are used to that; (157, ll. 259-60, my emphasis)

Gerhard Joseph, in a study not similar to what I propose, says something quite similar to the faith that the poem loosely upholds in the poem: “It is from the primordial maternal principle that the male ego must wrest an independent notion of self even *before* coming to terms with the paternal” (10, original emphasis). I must emphasize that the “primordial maternal principle” is what Ida calls a “monster” from the perspective of the percipient. This is very problematic in case of this poem since it is not the woman who is in touch with the principle but is thought to be by the relative generalization of the other. On the other hand, to be a “kind of monster” qualifies her not so much for the maternal principle as it qualifies her for monstrosity—something that the poem creates through its queer propriety. To be used to monstrosity also stretches the argument to a limit where the woman, who is masculine, gets *used* to neither gender but to the asexual monstrosity. The larger question created from this state of eternal deferment is, can the male “wrest an independent notion” of masculinity, manliness or manhood from this monstrosity, or is the deferment of such values the compromise of the Man?

II

The fracture of womanhood is what gathers strength as the poem advances to its end. It is from a wobbling feminine masculinity that the Transvestite recovers his masculine nature from; in other words, he re-masculinizes himself. Observe how Lady Blanche frames her wrath towards Princess Ida:

Yet I bore up in part from ancient love,
And partly that I hoped to win you back,
And partly that you were my civil head,
And chiefly you were born for something great,
In which I might your fellow worker be,
When time should serve; (Part IV, ll. 284-89)

In each of these sentences strung together by conjunctions, the first arises from an instinct; the second and third complete each other by performing the Kantian task of desire and necessity, whereas the last harks back again to that original question of the instinctive. This is crucial, since Lady Blanche avidly critiques the philosophical stance that greatness can be acquired, which in this case disqualifies the Princess of all the accomplishments she has had, for she *might* not have been “born” for masculinity or greatness. The use of the progressive “should” in the last line does not signify an achievement, but a deferment. What time serves therefore becomes a ‘lag’ however progressive, best understood by Jeanie Watson’s use of the phrase “progressive amelioration” (72) in her essay. If amelioration involves deferment of the growing masculinity in the female, the Transvestite stands to gain from it, but in what ways? As Lady Blanche’s ire amplifies, it transforms into a gender failure:

I will not boast;
Dismiss me, and I prophesy your plan,
Divorced from my experience, will be chaff
For every gust of chance, and men will say
We did not know the real light, but chased
The wisp that flickers where no foot can tread. (IV, ll.334-39, italics mine)

As the word “divorced” clearly suggests, Lady Blanche was playing second fiddle to Ida; her femininity was what Ida had *created* and conserved her masculinity from. Blanche’s transparency educates the readers of the immaturity in the scheme of perpetuating this gender-reversal since it was sustained by a ‘feminine’ fiddle by a female. The “plan” falls apart in her monologue. This contrives the formation of a moral vulnerability—the lack of “real light” (or the real dark) will be compensated by a new moral code: what the “men will say”. As can be seen, their judgment is philosophical; it does not hurt their actual practical scheme but affects its ideological value and morale—something that E.K. Sedgwick sums up in a more literal context: “he (the Prince) gets what he wants by losing the (physical) battle, not by winning it.” in order to “retain the privileged status ... along with the implicit empowerment of maleness” (615). The “effeminized” man has taken two steps towards male and maleness, but his capability of living the abstracted reality or dealing in a compromise is the most important question that the poem ruffles us with.

One must take a step back before posing to answer this question. Whether a man becomes a man in the concrete or abstract (here also as a cultural imposition) sense is dependent upon his re-masculinizing or his remaining demasculinized in a wholly new way. The solution to both questions can be tackled by critically answering if the act of Transvestism or the act of transcendence was successful or not. By the end of Part IV, an answer is supplied to some effect:

You have done well, and like a gentleman,
 And like a prince; you have thanks for all.
 And you look well too in your women's dress.
 Well have you done and like a gentleman.
 You saved our life; (ll. 507-10)

The Transvestite is now "like" a prince in his "women's dress", and his act is successful. Its success metaphorically establishes him not as the prince, but like the prince; the metaphor naturally positions itself, in a different context, between being a man and being like a man. This ambivalence remains although we cannot deny now that the prince is being re-masculinized both physically and morally. The act of transcendence initiated by the "women's dress" has upgraded him to his original position, but perhaps no more than realizing its peremptory deed—the deed that "saved our life". One should read the meaning at different levels in order to construe that the prince is not a man in the more abstract attributes that one attaches to the word (manly, manliness, manhood, masculine etc.) but purely concrete and agential. This critical deduction of man, I strongly emphasize, is executed to deny the imperious and more abstract mis-formulation of the word by the Prince's father:

Look you, Sir!
 Man is the hunter; woman is the game
 The sleek and shining creatures of the chase,
 They love us for it, and we ride them down. (V, ll. 146-49)

Almost immediately, the newly created man from his Transvestism has a semi-defensive offence to his father's assailable allegations:

"Yea, but Sire!" I cried,
 "Wild natures need wise curbs" (164-65)

The alliteration is intelligent; Tennyson astutely brings home the argument that the wild does not need domesticity but knowledge and wisdom—something that the Transvestite had acquired through transcendence. It need not necessarily mean that in his empathy for the feminine sex he lessens the acquired manhood he demonstrates; what he does more dexterously is identifying with the female sex while differing with them and deferring from the abstract imposed definition of manhood simultaneously. This gains clarity when Gama *wisely* eulogizes the Prince's accomplishments:

You talk almost like Ida; she can talk;
 And there is something in it as you say:
But you talk kindlier; we esteem you for it. (V, ll. 201-03, emphasis mine)

In Marjorie Stone's phrase, "Tennyson's position... ultimately reduces to "Vive la difference"" (112). There is no need to condescend; one understands that the difference is enforced on both sides and technically, it is the plot's position

and not Tennyson's by any large measure. The estimation by Gama is an estimation of the cognizance of the difference, not strictly the difference itself.

A study of both the songs and the animal imagery in the poem has been appositely done by Jane Wright. The meaning of lines like

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
 And murmuring of innumerable bees. (VII, ll. 206-07)

Or of Ida's songs, most specifically

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
 And slips into the bosom of the lake.
 So fold thyself my dearest, thou, and slip
 Into my bosom and be lost in me. (ll. 172-75)

Have been critiqued with efficiency.³ I cannot but estimate such a study where desire is in question. However, there are equivocal lines where desire becomes a moral question that has relative autonomy over both genders:

Like to like!
 The woman's garment hid the woman's heart. (V, ll. 294-95)

It is a moment of stereotypical revelation for the re-masculinized Transvestite. The desire of the mind, according to him, is never dissimilar to the physical desire that constitutes the gender. If it is "like to like", it is reciprocative with nature as witness to the axiom, and we can slightly tweak Wright's statement into the heterosexual's "desire", not the "heterosexual man's". This could be one way of justifying why the Transvestite finds both his mind and body not fundamentally, but derivatively in this process. As I have stated earlier, it does not intimate the 'man' with the abstract principles that float around conceptions like manhood or manliness. The realization through transcendence is far practical in approach by the time the poem achieves its natural end:

Know
 The woman's cause is man's; they rise or sink
 Together, dwarf'd or godlike, bond or free...
 [She] shares with man
 His nights, his days, moves with him to one goal. (VII, ll. 242-46)

The quote begins with two halves united by a cause; they face the tribulations both morally and theologically—informing them that no matter however distinct, in their oneness lies their synchronicity with the accepted ways. There is no cloying talk of principles (ethical, moral or spiritual) that each adheres to, but Tennyson accepts the biological differences without negating the moral equanimity which is the implied "effect" of the quote. That the cause *creates* the Transvestism is no secret; it furthers transcendence which in Eagleton's words, "reinforces his maleness" (79). The maleness is conjured up by relieving

the princess of her masculinity, creating a causative void fulfilled with the woman's 'womanliness' reinforced upon her rather than manifesting her as we might think. As the poet himself says,

For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse. (VII, ll. 259-60)

The word "diverse" contains the sense of both the different and the deferent; since in her purported divergence the Transvestite becomes a man, he cannot but subscribe to the diversity himself. In his participation, he cannot "achieve full manhood" (81) as Eagleton offers us. Instead, he achieves a diversity that is neither "manhood" or womanhood, but a diversity that we would proudly call a 'Man' and nothing more.

Notes

¹ pp. 559-60 of Johnston's essay are citeworthy. The entire reference is in the *Works Cited* section.

² Terry Eagleton's analysis is splendid on this occasion: "The bare bones of this narrative, after all, concern a 'feminine' male assuming female disguise in order to woo a 'masculine' female to whom he plays the roles of both child and lover." (77). Citations at the end of the essay.

³ "Ida ventriloquizes a literary representation of one kind of heterosexual man's desire; her 'sweet' voice is someone else's." (268). See "The Princess and the Bee", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 2015, pp. 251-273.

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