

All the World's a Dressing-room? Crossing Boundaries and Liminality in a Play about American Male Impersonator Annie Hindle by Irish Writer Emma Donoghue

Mária Kurdi

Emma Donoghue's play, *Ladies and Gentlemen* had its premiere at the Projects Arts Centre in Dublin, performed by Glasshouse Productions, a small, independent theatre company, in 1996. Just a few years later the drama crossed the Atlantic, another production of it being mounted by The Shee Theatre Company of San Francisco, in February 2003. The Shee advertises itself as a company which, according to their homepage, "seeks to promote a dialogue between artists, audiences and communities through theatrical productions, which explode social constraints and transform beyond prevailing definitions of 'Woman.'" Interestingly, the name of the theatre company forges a link between Irish cultural traditions and the contemporary American independent theatre world. It originates from the "Sidhe" (pronounced she), the Celtic shapeshifters, whose "powers transcend time and gender; they many be women or men, young or old" (The Shee). While the Sidhe often feature in modern Irish works, for instance in the early poems and plays of W. B. Yeats, their influence seems to be vivid enough to reach across the borders of not only time but space as well. After the opening-night performance of *Ladies and Gentlemen* in San Francisco The Shee Theatre Company people organized a postshow conversation with the public about Donoghue's literary and critical work concerned with gender and sexuality in general and the drama itself in particular.

It is hardly a wonder that *Ladies and Gentlemen* started to travel among cultures in such a short time and so successfully. Written by an Irish feminist author, who now lives in Canada, the play guides the audience to the culturally mixed, colourful and bohemian world of the late nineteenth century American vaudeville theatre, which provided public entertainment in the broadest terms by ambitiously cutting across diverse forms of stage performance, including songs, dance, mimes, ventriloquists, acrobats, jugglers, female and male impersonators (Wilmeth and Miller 479). About the history of the inception, rapid flourishing and enormous popularity of the vaudeville as a form to fulfill a need that emerged in the wake of the momentous changes that restructured the postbellum American society, theatre specialist John Kenrick writes:

By the 1880's, the Industrial Revolution had changed the once rural face of America. Half of the population was now concentrated in towns and cities, working at regulated jobs that left most of them with two things they never had back on the farm—a little spare cash and weekly leisure time. These people wanted affordable entertainment on a regular basis. Most variety shows

were too coarse for women or children to attend, and minstrel shows were already declining in popularity. In a world where phonographs, film, radio and television did not yet exist, something new was needed to fill the gap.

Before long, there arose a competition and rivalry among the increasing number of vaudeville troupes, who had their different concepts about the most profitable ways of entertaining the audience. Kenrick claims that “Tony Pastor was the first manager to present commercially successful ‘clean’ variety who, at the same time, earned lasting fame “as a variety vocalist, songwriter and manager on New York’s Bowery.” His ambitions, however, “reached far beyond the bawdy standards that marked Bowery entertainments. [. . .] Pastor wanted to provide family-friendly entertainment. When he started presenting a clean variety show at New York’s Fourteenth Street Theatre in 1881, the location said a great deal about his intentions” (Kenrick).

Annie Hindle, the protagonist of *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1998), was a real person living in the second half of the nineteenth century, whose name became connected with Tony Pastor’s vaudeville company in American theatre history. A reviewer of the 2003 American production of the play claims that “Donoghue first learned of Hindle through an article she read in an 1891 issue of the *New York Sun*, and was immediately compelled by her story, both for its investigation of gender and for its sheer theatrical nature” (Macklin). The “Author’s Note” to the text of the drama in the New Island Books Edition enlists various documentary sources the writer has drawn from to re-imagine Hindle’s figure, and the volume concludes with excerpts from the *New York Sun* article (in fact an extended obituary) published under the title “Stranger Than Fiction” (104). What is referred to as being stranger than fiction is, of course, reality itself. The author of the article sums up how Hindle, born in England in 1847, became a singer and male impersonator at an exceptionally young age, and later settled down in the United States where she made a sparkling career on the stage in a matter of months. Unusual enough thus far, the story assumes sensational proportions when the journalist proceeds to report about the adventurous course of Annie’s private life: first she got married to a man, a famous comic actor of that time, and then to a dresser of hers, a woman who had emigrated to America from Ireland. The one she became separated from not long after the wedding, the marriage having made her intensely disappointed, whereas the other partner she never ceased to dote on. Moreover, for the sake of enjoying domestic bliss with her, Annie even resigned from the stage not to return there until after the untimely death of her wife from breast cancer.

Conspicuously, Donoghue’s work takes a borderline position in terms of dramatic genre and form because of its subject: it depicts the story of a real person, part of the life of Annie Hindle. The present paper intends to discuss the issue of generic transgression alongside the representation of negotiating the boundaries of gender, cultural identity and the public-private divide as interlaced and overlapping concerns in the fabric of the drama. *Ladies and Gentlemen* inevitably falls into the category of the female biography play, a specific kind of life-writing which defines its own strategies in

relation to the long-standing, male-dominated biography tradition and invites a fresh approach from theorists. In a recent article of *Modern Drama* Ryan Claycomb claims that many staged biographies by female authors “show the process of representing a life while they present the life itself.” Plays of this kind, Claycomb adds, “respond to the imperative to place women in the pantheon of history but avoid the patriarchal trappings of the biographical tradition, by contextualizing and calling attention to the construction of their narratives” (526). In this respect Donoghue’s play is a unique specimen of the subgenre since it portrays a life centered on performance. Accepting Lib Taylor’s view that “[t]heatre proceeds through a process of impersonation and role-play[.]” (168), *Ladies and Gentlemen* can be seen as doubling this characteristic in so far as it stages a protagonist who acts out impersonation itself. By doing so, the drama strengthens its potential to “function as a critical site for exploring the constitution of identity through performativity” (Taylor 168). A more conventional representation would, perhaps, attempt to reclaim the private life of such a well known public person by allowing the audience to see him/her without the mask worn as the external role requires. Not so Donoghue, who follows the Wildean precept and gives Annie the mask to enable her to tell the innermost private truths about herself.

In reference literature the particular act of performance Annie excelled in, male impersonation or the so called “breeches role” is usually discussed alongside its counterpart, the male-presented drag in the socio-historical context of the period. The contemporary conditions can be seen as a transition with regard to the decisive changes in the discourse on gender: “Unlike the ancient and sanctioned practice of men portraying women on stage, female assumptions of male identity appeared in the theatre as a novelty, a salacious turn, a secular Johnny-come-lately” Laurence Senelick writes (326). Surveying the Anglophone world to pinpoint the prevalence of related practices from the 1860s onwards, the critic finds that

North America offered scope for serious male impersonation because women were more welcome in active professions [than in Britain], especially when their men were at war or pioneering. Its frontier implemented social mobility by means of transvestism. The Gold Rush and Western Expansion prompted so great an influx of female cross-dressers that advertisements in mining regions had to specify “No young woman in disguise need apply” [. . .]. During the Civil War, the sutlers and even middle-class matrons serving in the Sanitary Commission adopted an “army costume” of loose trousers covered by a sashed kilt and kirtle. Encomiasts were swift to emphasize that the trappings of masculinity in no way detracted from a fundamentally tender and “womanly” nature, so long as their manly exteriors were confined to the field and the camp. (327-28)

Annie Hindle herself came on the scene in the United States, Senelick continues, “when the female emancipation movement was growing more vociferous and de-

manding. On stage, unruly women disguised as men were less threatening [. . .]” (340). At just the right time, one might conclude in view of the social and discursive conditions, to succeed in attracting large audiences whose female members may well have harboured the secret wish to choose to dress and behave like men. Male spectators, in contrast, were content to see that the transgressive inclinations of the “other” were duly contained and regulated within the walls of a public institution, the theatre.

Donoghue’s title, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, carries a dual meaning. On the one hand, it evokes a crucial theme of the play, gender, exposing its constructed status through the selection of a pair of culturally loaded, strategically contrasted signifiers. On the other hand, the title deploys a well-known staple of the theatre and public events in the wider sense, the phrase with which the audience is addressed when a performance or gathering is opened. Overlapping yet distinct, the two meanings interact with each other in an intriguing way. The binary formulation of the subject of gender carried by the title is undermined: the reference to the theatre suggests that acts of illusion will represent the gender divide in the play, rendering it slippery and opening it up to interrogation. This initially posited metatheatricality is further enhanced by choosing the dressing-room to be the primary setting of the action, a liminal, in-between space where performers like Annie discard their everyday, private selves and prepare themselves for their next entrance on stage, entailing the confrontation of an audience gathered in a public arena. Costume, make-up and other professional requisites like the false moustache or beard gain relevance, and, by means of them, the act of changing roles also in terms of gender is emphasized as central to the drama.

Female biography plays, to quote Claycomb again, tend to “show their subjects in communities and not as discrete entities” (526). In *Ladies and Gentlemen* this ambition becomes intertwined with the metatheatrical aspect of the play since the author brings on stage Annie’s closest colleagues and offers an insight into their engagement with the developing art of the vaudeville. According to an article by women affiliated with Glasshouse Productions, which premiered the play in Dublin, Donoghue’s work “is also very much about the love of theatre itself, the excitement, the camaraderie and occasionally the drudgery of it all” (Williams et al. 146). The vaudeville troupe’s boss, Tony Pastor, is shown in a way which complicates if not subverts the idealized image theatre history seems to have of him. Here he is introduced as an efficient manager who, nevertheless, constantly worries about the reputation and fortunes of the company. In one of the scenes Annie and Gilbert Saroney, a female impersonator often functioning as the protagonist’s partner, are rehearsing a duet which culminates in an obscene mime. Characteristically, Tony’s resentment stems from envisaging the moral reaction of a particular urban audience as opposed to that of less sophisticated country people:

TONY. Just to satisfy my curiosity: are you two aiming to have me arrested?
ANNIE. Ah, you are safe as long as we keep our clothes on.

TONY. That's bunkum. We-re touring the frontiers no more. Baltimore ladies won't stand for no old-fashioned dirty burlesque. (31)

Another member of the troupe is Ella Wesner, who started out as a dresser and, having learnt the art through observing her colleagues, became a male impersonator to make her own career. Her story confirms Kenrick's claim that "[w]omen, uneducated immigrants, the poor—anyone with determination and a talent to entertain could earn a solid, respectable living" as a vaudeville performer. By the frequent references to their reaction and the citations from their letters to Annie as a celebrity, the audience is also assigned a significant part in the play's portrayal of the ups and downs of theatre life. Gilbert's words, "I didn't think anything was private in this business" (13), offer a clear-cut formulation of the inseparability of the private and public domains within the vaudevillians' profession.

Throughout the 1870s, when Annie's career was rising, "[t]heatregoers were rarely confronted with a woman plausibly playing a man's man" Senelick contends (326). In contrast, relying on a much longer tradition and benefiting from conventional assumptions concerning the gendered nature of talent, crossed-dressed male artists were usually seen as able to achieve subtle meanings. The difference lay in the eyes of the beholder as it so often happens: for many, male impersonation simply lacked "depth and resonance," the act of pretension being easily discovered and comfortably labelled as a "sentimental, and therefore harmless reversal" (Ackroyd qtd. in Davy 235). Annie, however, proved to be an exception, not sharing the precarious fate of other contemporary male impersonators. An acclaimed speciality of her performance was that she appeared not in the usual stereotypical roles of "a sailor or a farmhand or a school-boy" on stage that lovers of the music-hall had been accustomed to, "but as a flash young spark, clad in natty, well fitting street-wear" (Senelick 329). In other words, she impersonated an individual, whom many an average theatregoer could make herself/himself recognize for a real, desirable man and not just appreciate as a good imitation, by which she stole the hearts of hundreds of young lady spectators and secured her own success on the stage. A well-known vaudeville performer, Annie Hindle, of course, developed a public identity, accommodating the ways how she was perceived by the audience that not only admired but probably needed her too as an icon incarnating the enviable potential to transgress the otherwise strict gender-divide.

Donoghue's Annie invests in having an attractive public image, which the writer imagines as influenced by the ambition to lend distinction to her own practice of crossed-dressed performance, and constructs herself in opposition to the average male impersonator of the day. About a rival she says: "Vera Vestris goes on the drag just to flash her meaty legs. Whereas I set out to look more man than men do" (23). Believing in the transformational power of role-playing, Annie casts herself as a modern artist. Notions about "the real thing," as Henry James, her contemporary, reminds us, may prove to be a controversial site, undermining the traditionally held difference between "truth" and "real." In the concluding part of James's 1892 short story,

“The Real Thing,” the characters who think they offer “the real thing” yet always remain “the same thing,” need to bow “their heads in bewilderment to the perverse and cruel law in virtue of which the real thing could be so much less precious than the unreal” (175). To reinforce the new concept of artistry Donoghue’s Annie seems to have unconsciously shared with modernist artists, Oscar Wilde flashes up in the text by way of a reference to his lectures on aesthetics delivered in America at the time of the play’s action. His principles, notoriously, negotiated the freedom of creation and self-creation in and through art to contest the limitations of identity imposed by both Irish nationalist and British imperialist discourses, with gender as an important aspect of resistance. In contemporary Ireland, Wilde’s country of origin, political nationalism advocated the “rhetoric of manliness,” Adrian Frazier contends, to counter the feminizing tendencies underlying the opposition of self and other as set up within the colonialist discourse. Several dedicated Irish cultural nationalist artists of the period, however, expressed profound disrespect for binaries when they set out exploring “a richness in the possibilities of masculinity” and showed their preference for “shifting ways of acting out gender.” Frazier’s line of examples includes “Wilde, Hugh Lane, and Roger Casement; the aesthetic, donnish revolutionaries like Joseph Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh; and also the specific, uncategorical masculinities of [George] Moore, Edward Martyn and W. B. Yeats [. . .]” (11).

Through Annie, the drama introduces female cross-dressing on stage as an art which uses performative strategies to re-negotiate gender and unsettle the norms that define masculinity as a stable category. She does not just pretend to look like a man, Annie herself argues, but impersonates one, “which is far more demanding than just being one” (22). Dedicated to realize the subversive potential of the theatrical act she practises, Annie is very much aware of and is able to summarize the gendered signification of “men’s clothes,” her professional wear:

RYANNY. But do you like wearing men’s clothes?

ANNIE. They’re only called that because men got a hold of them first. You bet your sweet life I like ‘em; they’ve got pockets for everything. (22)

Dressed in shirt and trousers and wearing a moustache Annie embodies transvestism which crosses boundaries and intervenes in the anxiously held conviction that gender identity is an unchangeable given (see Garber 177). Her version of male impersonation presents the body as protean and herself as “the model of modern man,” put into words by her favourite song, “A Real Man” (103). The public mask of Annie, thus, relies on the re-construction of the male impersonator as a self-styled artist, offering context to the reclamation of the private side of her life as a biographical character (see Claycomb 540), which is the ultimate concern of Donoghue’s drama.

Male impersonation offered by Annie exposes as well as makes full use of the performative nature of gender. Judith Butler argues: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity,

then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (901). By acting in men's clothes, imitating male corporeal movements with ease and plausibly addressing women in songs to regard her as an eligible male, Annie succeeds in unfixing gender identity, since "drag can be read as revealing that the original [masculinity] itself is already an 'act'" (Harris 58). Annie's achievement confirms that the transformation Butler posits is a realizable potential. Its validity is further represented in the play by a letter from one of her young female admirers, which contains the confession: "Darling Mr Hindle, please oh please oh please leave off this pretence that you are a woman only dressed as a man. [. . .] I told my mother I know you are a real true man and I intend for to marry you" (38). The association of the performing female body with authentic masculinity carries an ambiguity that calls attention to the fluid nature of gender versus its use as a mediator of social conditioning and a scale of discursive inscriptions. By cross-dressing, Annie is able to make her body function, in Susan Bordo's words, "as a locus of practical cultural control" (104) and thereby call attention to the negotiability of gender and the possibility to unfix its normative borders.

"I'm very drawn to that early feminist idea that gender is an invention and we shouldn't let it weigh too heavily," Donoghue said during a recent phone conversation, adding that while the onstage Hindle was 'a real stumper, a roaring shake-the-house-down man,' her life behind the scenes was different (and calmer)" (Macklin). However, the portrayal of Annie's second marriage in the drama further demonstrates that it is possible to cross the socially inscribed and officially safeguarded boundaries of gender. The dresser, who ran away from a convent in Ireland, was originally called Annie Ryan. So as not to have a shadow Annie beside and inferior to herself, a widely known celebrity, Hindle rechristens the girl as Ryanny, giving her a new, androgynous identity by combining Ryan, a man's name with the shortened version of their shared first name. For Ryanny, Annie looks "more of a gentleman than any man I ever laid eyes on" (58); so real a gentleman that she insists that Annie propose to her on her knees and they get married "for *real*" (56) in church by a minister and with the usual paraphernalia, then even pose for a "*husband-and-wife photograph*" (65). On the one hand, it is her conservative upbringing and strict Catholic family roots that motivate Ryanny to construct their intimate ties in terms of the sanctified Victorian model of marriage. On the other hand, she has come a long way from her culturally inculcated rejection of lesbian relationships that she expresses on first hearing about their occurrence in the theatre environment. The play, Mary Trotter claims, "uses performance's power to imagine and embody multiple perspectives and identities as a metaphor for the Irish-American Ryanny's self-invention into an independent woman, living a life radically different than the one prescribed for her when she left Ireland" (45). Even her request that she should be wed by Annie according to law and custom can be seen as a highly subversive act, which constitutes an early example of same-sex marriage by the violation of age-old traditions. It is a well known fact that lesbian and gay

marriage features as a much debated and only in a few places recognized option even more than a century later than Donoghue's plot.

The representation of the two women's life together further ambiguates gender by applying lesbian theatrical space and practices. Again performance, of newly found identities, is a key element and essential force. On the outside, the neighbours assign the role of "those Hindle sisters" (71) to them, while Annie and Ryanny appear as a butch-femme couple who construct family roles for themselves, by which they transgress the respective norms of the dominant system. Relishing these to the full, they act out little domestic scenes, with housewife telling off husband and husband teasing her with mock apologies, for instance in the following:

RYANNY. Every time I have the fruitbowl nicely arranged, you pinch something and topple my bananas.

ANNIE. How have you managed to put up with me for four years, Mrs. Hindle? (70)

However, as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, while butch-femme relations contest the naturalizing effects of conventional gender roles, they may "still presuppose the normative (heterosexual) complementarity in lesbian couplings" (170). Donoghue's play counteracts this problem: it is emphasized in it that the two women belong to a distinctive female culture, mainly by foregrounding an object of "everyday use." At the beginning of the drama Annie enters the scene carrying "*a quilt, carpet bag and letter box*" (7). The quilt is genuine patchwork, appearing to be her much cherished piece of heritage from the now dead Ryanny, who possessed it as family treasure made by her mother back in Ireland. Wrapped around the shoulders it gives warmth and the feeling of continuity with other bodies. It evokes memories and associations as well as symbolizes the enduring values of female-centered traditions and women's creativity the way it does in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use", and other American literary works by women.

At the same time, lesbian sexuality is suggested to be a site of experimentation in Donoghue's drama, paralleling what the writer says to one of her interviewers: "in terms of the details of technique, lesbians are often very imaginative because there's no one thing they've been traditionally told to do" (1067). Their choice empowers Annie and Ryanny "to playfully put on and take off the gendered sign-systems of appearance [and] play with the structures of representation, without being contained within them" (Aston 103). Another significant piece of stage property in the play is the dummy called Miss Dimity by members of the troupe, which the couple receive as a present to remind them of the dressing-room they left behind to get married. Displaying a bare body to be given shape and character by the kind of cover which is selected for it, the figure of Dimity suggests, metonymically, that woman as a sexed signifier is open to a range of intriguing potentials rather than remaining a carrier of fixities. Significantly, Donoghue's representation distinguishes Annie and Ryanny's

relationship from practising or pretending homosexuality as mere fashion, which was frequent and vivid among artists and lovers of art in fin de siècle Paris as observed by Ella while running “this sort of salon at the *Café Américain*” during her stay there (89). She reports that showing off as a lesbian is “*très chic*” especially among married women in the elegant circles, and “you’ll never guess who I met on the arm of this rich painter woman [. . .] La Bernhardt herself” (90).

Being an Irish author’s play which dramatizes the life of an English-born American male impersonator married to an Irishwoman, *Ladies and Gentlemen* crosses national borders in more than one sense. On the one hand, the art of quilting itself was of European origin. “Emigrants took the tradition of making patchwork to America. Among these emigrants were the people of Ireland with their long tradition of making patchwork”—the homepage of Ulster American Folkpark informs us. The quilt in the play, thus, is not just a personal object but establishes a cultural link between Irish and American women, in fact among women from different parts of the world. On the other hand, to quote Dawn Duncan about an important shift in the recent development of Irish drama, *Ladies and Gentlemen* is one of those plays that “move from internal examination to external vision, from isolated solidarity to global union,” assuming that “[i]n reality, times past and present and future, there are many Irish identities” (235). Arguably, in the ongoing interrogation of cultural identity across contemporary Ireland gender holds a position more important than ever. Introducing their 1997 volume *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis maintain that the “fairly sudden social change in Ireland [. . .] is directly concerned with gender,” and there is “a growing intellectual awareness of the extent to which social experience, past and present, is gendered” (1). To give examples for gender having become a major aspect of a range of socially anchored debates in Ireland during the last two decades, suffice it to mention the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and the 1995 public referendum that made legal divorce possible. Donoghue’s work enters the international scene, crossing both time and space, to put the subject of gender along with its challenges into a larger perspective.

In her study of Irish immigrants Mary J. Hickman contends that although the re-racialization of the Irish and their acceptance as white in the US began during the civil war and continued through the 1860s, the Irish stereotype did not disappear so easily (124). Among New England professionals Annie must have become acquainted with clichés fabricated of the Irish use of English reminiscent of stage-Irishisms, since “[m]uch of the comedy in vaudeville dealt in racial stereotypes with the Dutch, Irish, Jewish, black-face, Swedish, and Italian comics the most familiar” (Wilmeth and Miller 479). In a scene between the lovers this tendency is interrogated and undermined as essentially fake by the authentic experience of a person from Ireland.

ANNIE. [. . .] Say, you can help me with a new Oirish tune I picked up in Boston; it’s got this chorus that goes “Begorrah and Bejapers and Bad Cess to Ye All.”

RYANNY. I'm not aware that I speak like that. (28)

What Ryanny unmasks here is the convenient practice of misrepresenting and ridiculing the cultural specificities of Irish (and other) immigrants in both the society and on the stage. Thus the difference in the national background of the two women appears in the drama not as a necessary source of tension but as dialogical, a site of facilitating the contestation of false assumptions about "otherness." The multicultural world of the theatre, at the same time, is shown as a space where the re-construction of identity is possible on a wider basis than one's narrowly understood origins and cultural background.

Discussing the techniques of dramatizing women's life-stories, Stephanie Kramer refers to "the double time structure" these biographical plays usually have, alongside a frequent employment of scenic presentation (74, 77). *Ladies and Gentlemen* qualifies also as a memory play, hinging on a string of chronologically revealed associations. The play's structure is working across two temporal modes; its main line of action, set during hardly more than a few hours in 1891, focuses on Annie after she had been called back to work at the vaudeville theatre following her wife, Ryanny's funeral. In the present she is shown in the act of dressing and undressing, putting on, taking off, then resuming men's clothes again, while preparing to re-enter the stage. The sequence is accompanied by hesitation, fear, anxiety and the self-doubt she suffers, implying the question whether she is able to perform the usual acts centering on mirth and geared to entertain after having endured the trials of extreme private trauma. The fairy tale-like clichés of her songs having turned into a nightmare, her very identity is threatened: "*As she puts on eyebrow stick, she addresses herself in the hand-mirror: It's a simple story, all told, ladies and gentlemen. Not so much 'Lost and Found' as 'Found and Lost.' [. . .] What am I doing here?*" (7). Moreover, "Homes, weddings and partings, that's what they're all about. How can I go out there and sing this stuff like it doesn't matter?" (47). Action in the present is interspersed with incidents evoked from Annie's memories by certain movements or scraps of music. Displaying the inside of her head, the recollected, sometimes partly imagined scenes follow a chronological line of their own to run a cycle between first meeting her lover to the trauma of losing her to death. This kind of structural arrangement manages to anchor the private story in an archetypal frame.

The disruptions of Donoghue's plot-line, which depict the self-lacerating broodings of Annie, create an expressionistic montage to reflect on the character's subjective landscape at the expense of offering a fuller picture of the decisive circumstances and crucial moments of her public life. Encouraged by her colleagues, Annie eventually puts on the trousers and the usual male gear, and steps on the "boards" to sing and play again as of old, because, she realizes, "This is all I've got" (100)—to perform is necessary. "For Aristotle, imitation is natural to humankind" Lesley Ferris reminds us (165), in the light of which notion Annie's creative gender impersonation seems to assume the status of a metaphor for life itself, carrying a range of memories from

happiness to loss and mourning. Widening its own borders, this biographical play, at the same time, portrays an individual woman's story in support of a feminist agenda since "Performance, as a practice, can offer glimpses of utopia," suggesting how different our lives could be in case objectives like freedom were not just longed for but "truly achieved" (Dolan 495). The dressing-room functions as the liminal site of preparations, reconsiderations and expectations preceding the unpredictable mysteries of performance, which has the potential to liberate the player through expanding and multiplying his/her boundaries of self. Where all this happens is the stage, a space of fluidities and wonders the world is so memorably identified with by the greatest ever of all masters of crossdressing, Shakespeare.

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