

Martin Marty Center Religion and Culture Web Forum

December, 2004

The Mythology of Self-Imitation in Passing: Race, Gender and Politics

by Wendy Doniger, University of Chicago

Introduction

In both real life and the mythology that extends from ancient India to the contemporary Anglophone world, people have had various reasons to pass in various ways—to pretend to belong to a race, gender, or political group other than the one that they regard as their own. In many instances, after this first masquerade has taken place, a secondary charade overlays the first so that the person seems—but only seems—to be what he or she was at the start, self-imitating. There are black people who pretend to be white people pretending to be black: the protagonist of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, and the writer Anatole Broyard. There are men who pretend to be women pretending to be men: the eighteenth century Chevalier d'Eon and the castrato (or, perhaps, woman) who bamboozled Casanova. And there are actors who pretend to be politicians pretending to be actors: Reagan and Schwarzenegger.

These stories, for all their Machiavellian labyrinths, have much to tell us about our basic ideas about authenticity, identity, and the relationship between public and private selves. They are myths as I define them in the broadest sense: stories that are not necessarily connected with a particular religion but that have the force of religious beliefs, that endure in the cultural imagination as religious texts do, and that deal with deeply held beliefs that religions, too, often traffic in. Such myths are often invoked by

people in real-life situations that duplicate the situations they have heard about in myths. There are myths associated both with self-imitation in general and with the more particular form of passing as what you are. In this article I would like to explore some of the implications of self-imitation in racial passing, gender passing, and political passing.

Acting Out in Politics

Let us begin with the self-imitation of film actors who play the parts of politicians who then become actors. Famous people are often driven to self-impersonation through the pressure of public expectations: this happens to Hollywood actors, popular writers (Hemingway is a notorious self-imitator), and the sorts of public figures who are nowadays called icons, often famous for nothing but being famous. Politicians are great self-imitators, and when an actor actually becomes a politician the felonies are compounded. When Ronald Reagan auditioned for the part of the President of the United States in the 1960 Broadway production of Gore Vidal's play *The Best Man*, about a presidential election, Vidal turned him down because he didn't think Reagan would be believable as the president. When asked about this in 2002, Vidal said, "Reagan was a first-rate actor as a President."¹ Indeed he was. Lou Cannon, in his aptly named biography, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, tells how, at the celebrations on June 6, 1984, on Omaha Beach, commemorating the Normandy invasion, Reagan, who had never been out of the U. S. during World War II, "gave the impression of returning to Normandy," to the utter mystification of the other world leaders, including Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, Queen Beatrix I of the Netherlands, and Mitterand, who had actually been captured by the Germans and escaped from a P.O.W. camp. (In fact, more

recent evidence of Mitterand's connection with Vichy in the early days of World War II indicate that he, too, could turn and turn about.) Cannon tells how Reagan had conjured up this imaginary war record, the film actor playing the part of a real actor in history:

Films are real to Reagan. His performance in Normandy recalled the experiences of Captain Reagan—an actor who wore his uniform to work in Culver City, played the lead role in *This Is the Army* and participated in a top-secret project used to train U. S. bombing crews for their destructive raids on Tokyo. As Reagan tells the story, “Our special effects men—Hollywood geniuses in uniform—built a complete miniature of Tokyo”² on a sound stage, above which they rigged a crane and camera mount. They then photographed the miniature, showing the targets as they would look from planes flying at different altitudes and speeds under varying weather conditions. Reagan was the narrator, guiding pilots onto their targets.³

This war game, the antecedent of the computer games that children play, enabled pilots—real pilots—to practice their bomb runs on Tokyo—real bomb runs that Hollywood would then reenact in fictionalized films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*. Thus as Garry Wills argued, Reagan's war service was “based on the principled defense of faking things.”⁴ This was Reagan's war. As he told Landon Parvin, “Maybe I had seen too many war movies, the heroics of which I sometimes confused with real life.”⁵ When Oliver North was exposed and put on trial, Reagan's comment was, “It's going to make a great movie.”⁶ As an actor, he had helped real fighter pilots bomb a fake Tokyo; as an actor pretending to be a president, walking on a real battlefield with a real war veteran who had become president of France, Reagan could not distinguish his performance in films about WWII from his (non-existent) performance in WWII. He was narrating the plot of a war film he'd starred in, which—like so much of what passed for his memory—was more real to him than reality, so much simpler, so much more flattering to his vanity.⁷

Vidal always referred to Reagan as “our acting President,”⁸ which became the title of a book about Reagan, subtitled (on the cover), “Ronald Reagan and the Supporting Players Who Helped Him Create the Illusion That Held America Spellbound.” This book recounts the following anecdote: “His entry into politics inspired a famous utterance by his former studio boss Jack Warner. When Warner was told that Reagan was running for governor of California, Warner, always quick to recognize a casting blunder, protested, ‘No, no! Jimmy Stewart for governor, Ronald Reagan for best friend.’”⁹ In the Hollywood film *Late for Dinner* (1991), a man who was frozen in the early 1960’s and awakes in 1991 encounters his wife, who tries to explain to him how much time has passed, how much he has missed. She tells him that Ronald Reagan was shot, and he replies, “Someone shot the guy from *The Cattle Queen of Montana*?” David Thompson’s short but rapier-sharp biography of Reagan describes his presidency as a nationwide series in which, after his “West Coast daytime talk show, *Ask The Governor*, from 1966-74...for eight years...he played *Mr. President?—That’s Me!*, amassing more camera time than anyone else in the Actors’ Guild and deftly feeding the lines and situations of Warner Brothers in the 1940s back into world affairs... The rest would be history—and he did seem rested.”¹⁰

But something even more invidious was accomplished by Reagan’s impersonation of a president. The masking and unmasking went in both directions, finally exposing not just Reagan but the man he pretended to be. Because of Reagan, “The fraudulence of the Presidency was revealed so that the office could never quite be honored again.” In retrospect, we saw that other glamorous presidents, like Kennedy, had also been merely impersonating presidents. And F.D.R.? And Lincoln? Why was the

character in *The Truman Show* (about a person whose life is entirely encased within a television serial that he mistakes for real life) named after a president—indeed, a president famous for his blunt honesty and lack of pretensions?

Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, has been well trained for the part: he starred in three self-imitation movies (*Total Recall*, *True Lies*, and *The Sixth Day*) and is said to have committed over five hundred murders—on film. Many have sighed in relief at the knowledge that, born in Austria, he can't be president. But here's an alarming bit of trivia. In the film *Demolition Man* (1993), John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone), who has been in a coma, frozen in 1996 and thawed out in 2032 (when the movie is set), discovers the Schwarzenegger Presidential Library. He expresses astonishment (perhaps because it is not the Stallone Presidential Library?) that "the actor" could have been president (repeating the gag that *Late for Dinner* had used two years earlier about Ronald Reagan, who *was* president). His colleague (Sandra Bullock) then explains that, even though Schwarzenegger was not born in this country, he was so popular at the time that people passed a "61st Amendment, which states that ..." Stallone interrupts her by saying, "I doan wanna know." Out of the mouths of hunks: since Schwarzenegger's election as governor, there has been a movement to ratify an amendment to the Constitution so that he can run for president, and Schwarzenegger himself has publicly expressed his belief that immigrants should be allowed to run for president. Moreover, in a move eerily reminiscent of Reagan's old unsuccessful bid for the role of president in Gore Vidal's play, Schwarzenegger almost failed to be cast in his greatest role, the Terminator, in 1984 because the director, James Cameron, had O. J. Simpson in mind for the part; Simpson lost it to Schwarzenegger, however, because, as

Cameron told *Esquire*, “People wouldn’t have believed a nice guy like O. J. playing the part of a ruthless killer.”¹¹ The implications of this comparative judgment are chilling. So is the further distancing from reality implied in the belief that Schwarzenegger is imitating Reagan (imitating a president); the title of a *New York Times* article about Schwarzenegger’s bid for governor was, “An Actor, Yes, but No Reagan.”¹² This was already an imitation of a well-known joke told about Jack Kennedy, among others: The story went that a woman said of every man she slept with, “He’s great, but he’s no Jack Kennedy,” until she finally got to sleep with Kennedy himself and reported, “Great, but no Jack Kennedy.” Lloyd Bentsen may or may not have had this story in mind in his famous rejoinder to Dan Quayle in Omaha, Nebraska, on October 5, 1988: “Senator, You’re no Jack Kennedy.” Uncertainty regarding the original date of the anecdote makes it unclear whether the political joke is punning on the sexual or the sexual on the political. But Norman Mailer (cited by Alan Brinkley in 1960) said that Kennedy was the first actor as president.

Bill Clinton’s great contributions to this genre, such as making it X-rated, were capped by the film *Wag the Dog* (1997), in which a president embroiled in a sex scandal deflects public attention with a fictitious war film that is sold to the American people as if it were real news footage of a war against Albania. And that film-within-a-film was implicitly cited after September 11, 2001, to undercut President Bush’s use of the war and war footage, against first Afghanistan and then Iraq, to deflect public unrest at the collapse of the stock market and the failing economy at large. In Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Afghanistan* became the title of a Western movie starring Bush and Cheney. Once faith is shaken, it is hard to keep it out of free fall.

Passing

One might say that these actors were passing as politicians passing as actors, but the word “passing” is usually used in a more particular sense. Where individual people may willingly masquerade, society as a whole often forces people of one group to pass as people of another group, or as themselves. The inhabitants of places known for their ethnic charm, where tourism has become a major industry, consciously exaggerate their own stereotypes to please the visitors, the British laying on the ye olde with a shovel, the Irish their blarney, the Parisians their disdain for tourists. The politics of colonialism produced another, more serious sort of self-parody, in this case perhaps unconscious; Edward Said wrote of “the paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an ‘Arab’ of the sort put out by Hollywood...The modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing.”¹³ Orientalism, like other forms of political domination, has also inspired what James Scott has taught us to recognize as the arts of resistance, the weapons of the weak,¹⁴ which include a kind of apparent self-mockery that actually mocks the mockers.

The term “passing” is most often applied to racial passing, black people pretending to be white, but more recently it has also been applied to gender passing, gay people pretending to be straight or people of one gender pretending to be people of the other gender.¹⁵ In both race and gender, social pressures force individuals to masquerade, usually (though not always) as someone of a higher and/or more powerful class. And in both race and gender, the simplistic paradigm (black passing as white or woman passing as man/man as woman) is destabilized by the intrinsic insubstantiality of the original categories and dichotomies that are the basis of their construction. The mythology of

racial and gender passing demonstrates that everyone who passes is, in a very real sense, self-imitating; since there is neither an ur-purity of race nor an unambiguous gender identity, anyone “black” passing as white is in effect white-as-black-as-white, and a female passing as male is, to some degree, a male-as-female-as-male. Let us begin with racial passing, both in recorded history and in fictional narratives, and then consider gender passing.

Black as White as Black

In William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932), the foundling Joe Christmas may or may not have some Negro ancestry. He thinks he does and passes for white. When he tells the white woman who is his secret lover that he fears he is of mixed race, she says, “How do you know that?” and he realizes, “I don’t know it,” and then he says, “If I’m not, damned if I haven’t wasted a lot of time.”¹⁶ More than time is wasted by this self-masquerade of a (perhaps) white man who thinks he is a black man pretending to be a white man: soon Joe is castrated and killed by racists who think he is black and know he has slept with a white woman.

Relatively few films have been made about the quandary of passing because of the visual dilemma that it poses: What does the actress look like when she is supposed to look like a black person who looks like a white person? The simple answer is, a white person. The irony of racism inheres in the fact that people who do not *look* black at all are defined as black by non-visual criteria, invisible genealogical criteria, though the convention still assumes that they may be identified by skin color. Fredi Washington, who played the part of a passing black woman in the 1934 version of the film based on

Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*, was a very fair skinned woman with light eyes, but she and everyone else regarded her as black. In real life, she resisted the temptation to pass: Hollywood studio heads, comparing her to Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Constance Bennett, and Greta Garbo, urged her to pass for white, but she refused. Instead, she limited herself to just a few straightforward black roles (with Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, and Ethel Waters) and became involved in the black community, as head of the Negro Actors Guild. In the 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*, however, Douglas Sirk cast the white Susan Kohner as the passing black woman, which resulting in white as black as white; as Mary Ann Doane remarks of this film, "There is one body too much."¹⁷ On one occasion in this version, white friends ask the black woman passing as white to serve at table; she carries the tray of food on her head and announces, "I learned it from my mammy and she learned it from her massuh befo' she belonged to you." "The representational convolutions involved in this scene are mind-boggling. The spectator is faced with a white (Susan Kohner the actress) pretending to be a black pretending to be a white pretending to be a black (as incarnated in all the exaggerated attributes of Southern blackness). Ontology is out of reach."¹⁸ These reversals of reversals produce a kind of vertigo, so that the "true" race is obscured or, more precisely, revealed to be the unknowable and meaningless illusion that it is.

As long as the illusion prevails, however, it tends to produce self-imitations. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2002) is about a black man named Coleman Silk who passes as a white man, a Jew; he often tells people that, "down in Virginia at the close of World War II, because his name didn't give him away as a Jew—because it could as easily have been a Negro's name—he'd once been identified, in a brothel, as a nigger

trying to pass and been thrown out.” After years of dropping these heavy hints, which no one ever seems to have picked up, he actually tells his secret to a white woman he falls in love with. She befriends a crow that has been raised in captivity and doesn’t know how to caw properly but “imitates the schoolkids that come here and imitate him. When the kids on the school trips imitate a crow.”¹⁹ The overtones of “Jim Crow” are surely relevant to this parallel self-imitation, as is the irony of the plot: Silk is fired from his academic post when he uses the word “spook” (intended in the sense of “ghost” and perceived as a racial slur). He is undone by that inadvertent pun, though his whole adult life has been, in a sense, the embodiment of an intended pun on the word *black*.

A related form of self-imitation occurs when mothers pretend to be the mothers of their own children, a theme that can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible, where Moses’ mother, having cast him away upon the waters, is then employed by his adoptive family (who happen to be the royal family of Egypt) as his wet-nurse, that is, as the substitute for his mother. When this theme made it to Hollywood in *Imitation of Life* (1959), in which (as we have just seen) a black woman who passes as white pretends to be black, which she is, her mother on one occasion pretends to be her mother, which she is. The theme surfaces briefly in *The Human Stain*, when Coleman Silk is about to marry a white woman, and his mother anticipates (correctly) that he will never acknowledge her as his mother; she says, “You tell me the only way I can ever touch my grandchildren is for you to hire me to come over as Mrs. Brown to baby-sit and put them to bed, I’ll do it.”²⁰ And when the Philip Roth novel made it to Hollywood (in 2003, with Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman), Silk’s mother imagined a different scenario at this point, taken from another part of the novel. Instead of the baby-sitting scenario, she suggests, “You’re

gonna walk around Penn Station and tell me to be there at 11 am to see my grandchildren.”

The fictional Coleman Silk bears a striking resemblance to an actual person, Anatole Broyard, who died in 1990 at the age of sixty-nine. A famous and influential literary critic, Broyard regarded himself as black: all his ancestors on both sides for over 200 years were defined as black, and his family was identified as Negro and identified itself as Negro. But his father, a light-skinned man married to a “high yellow” woman, during one period passed as white in order to join a union to get work in Brooklyn, and Anatole passed as white for all of his adult life. Some of his acquaintances (including his second wife, who was white) knew the truth, but he kept it from his children. He often expressed anti-black sentiments, even to the point of racism, which his wife justified with the logic of irony: “He had paid the price to be at liberty to say things that, if you didn’t know he was black, you would misunderstand. I think it made him ironical.” But this is a dangerous game: “When you change something basic about yourself into a joke, it spreads, it metastasizes, and so his whole presentation of self became completely ironic. *Everything* about him was ironic.” And he paid dearly for this irony: “a paradox: the man wanted to be appreciated not for being black but for being a writer, even though his pretending not to be black was stopping him from writing. It was one of the very few ironies that Broyard, the master ironist, was ill equipped to appreciate.”²¹ For Broyard’s writing was blocked because his creative gift was paralyzed, squeezed, as in a vise, within the claws of those ironic commas. He could never write the great novel everyone expected of him because he could not write in his own voice. He was living the novel

and so he could not write it. To tell his story would mean telling more than he wanted to tell.

Broyard wrote, as a white man, about black people, and it was often said that he had the talent of writing as if he were black. More than that, he wrote about Negroes who passed. In a 1950 *Commentary* article entitled, “Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro,” he said of one such man: “[H]is companions are a mirror in which he sees himself as ugly.” Surely Broyard’s literary creations were also such a mirror for him. And like Coleman Silk, he could not resist dropping hints about the truth, bitter in-jokes. In one article, he said he avoided his mother and father because they were “too colorful.”²² (Coleman Silk, too, as we have seen, had to avoid contact with his own mother). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. put it, “[Broyard] perfected the feat of being self-revelatory without revealing anything.” But what alternatives did he have? Gates spells it out: “Here is a man who passed for white because he wanted to be a writer, and he did not want to be a Negro writer.” It makes no more sense to say that a person with just a drop of white blood or one white ancestor (which Broyard probably had) and passes as white is running from his blackness than to say that a person with just a drop of black blood or one black ancestor (which Broyard said he probably had) and passes as black is running from his whiteness. It is all socially constructed.

Gates sums it up well: “If he was passing for white, perhaps he understood that the alternative was passing for black.”²³ This option, black passing for black, was available to him but rejected. And so if, as I suspect and has been widely speculated,²⁴ the Roth novel is a *roman à clef* inspired by Broyard, it is about a white man (Broyard) pretending to be a black man (Broyard) pretending to be a white man (in life) pretending

to be a black man (on the page), masquerading (in the book) as a black man (Coleman Silk) pretending to be a white man (Coleman Silk) pretending to be a black man (in his brothel anecdote). Perhaps Roth wrote the story of Anatole Broyard's life for him (as Gertrude Stein wrote Alice Toklas's autobiography for her), telling Broyard's truth at last in Coleman Silk's fiction.

Women as Men as Women

People can pretend to be their own genders via other genders. A man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man or a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman is in double drag, or, as the *New York Times* headline reviewing the 1995 musical *Victor/Victoria* called it, "in Drag, in Drag."

A brilliant example of this gender self-impersonation occurs in a stage comedy, *El Vergonzoso en palacio* or "The Bashful Man at the Palace," by Tirso de Molina (1584-1648), the man who made Don Juan famous:

Serafina, daughter of the Duke of Averro, boasted coldly that she had never been in love. She disguised herself as a man to act a male part in a palace farce in which she ardently embraced her governess Juana, who was playing a woman's part. Unbeknownst to her, Antonio, one of her rejected suitors, had commissioned an artist to paint her portrait—and when he saw her so passionate in her male costume, he told the artist to paint her like that. When he courted her the next day, however, she rejected him icily; furious, he threw down the portrait and left. But Serafina picked up the portrait and instantly fell in love with the handsome young man who so closely resembled herself. Juana, who had helped Antonio procure the portrait, lied, suggesting that this was a portrait of Dionis, an exiled relative, and told Antonio to come back that night, pretending to be Dionis. Antonio-as-[Serafina-as]-Dionis persuaded Serafina to marry him. Only then did she learn that the real Dionis had secretly married her older sister.²⁵

What are we to make of this labyrinth of genders and disguises? Serafina cannot connect with her lover except through gender-bending art forms (play and/or portrait) that release

her own androgynous sexuality. But her patent narcissism and homoeroticism (which she shares with Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, who also, in a sense, fell in love with a portrait of himself), push her one step further than those cousins and make her fall in love with her lover only when she sees him as a transvestite transformation of herself. This is a woman who not only pretends to be who she is but falls in love with the man she is.

Let us turn back again to real life, and to two famous historical figures,

The Chevalier d'Eon, and Casanova.

In a case from recorded eighteenth century French history, the Chevalier d'Eon turned out to be a man who pretended to be a transvestite. This is the story:

Once upon a time, more precisely on October 5, 1728, a child named Charles Geneviève Louis Auguste Andréa Thimothée d'Eon, also known as Charles de Beaumont, was born to a low-ranking nobleman in the town of Tonnerre in Burgundy. The child grew up to have a distinguished career as a diplomat and spy and a captain in the dragoons and was honored with the title of Chevalier for his bravery in the Seven Years' War. In 1770, rumors that he was a woman began to circulate in France and England, and in 1776 Louis XVI officially announced that d'Eon was and had always been a woman. The Chevalière, as she now became known, left France and lived the rest of her life as a woman in London. When she died, on May 21, 1810, it was discovered that she was anatomically male.²⁶

After d'Eon announced that he was a woman, he insisted that he did not want to wear women's clothing but had the right to wear his dragoon's uniform. Still wearing men's clothing in France, apparently concealing but actually revealing his anatomical sex (male but allegedly female), he encouraged people to conjure up the two negatives that cancelled one another out. Only after that did he dress in women's clothes, and even then only, he insisted, at the king's insistence, but since he continued to dress as a woman when he was in exile in England, with no French king to make him do it, one is inclined

to believe that he did protest too much. It was and still is widely believed that d'Eon first disguised himself as a woman in Russia in order to gain access to the Empress Elisabeth,²⁷ making him a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. Gary Kates points out that if d'Eon went to a cross-dressing ball (and there were many at that time), "he would not have to pose as someone else, but rather, his original self would now be regarded by others as female." But what was this "original self"? At many salons, "women began to masquerade as d'Eon, telling risqué stories and flirting with male guests."²⁸ But what were they masquerading as?

The sexual triple cross explains how d'Eon got away with it. Apparently, as long as no one with any status in Paris had any knowledge of d'Eon's male anatomy (and the strange thing is that no one, apparently, did: he was either celibate or very, very careful), he was safe from accusations or rumors from people who had known him in the provinces. (Half of his names are women's names, but the French *do* that.) Well, his mother lied for him, as mothers do, but the truth was that he set it up in such a way that he could not lose. He was able to project his fantasies upon the people he fooled without actually changing anything, just making other people imagine him differently. People later remarked that he had looked more feminine in his uniform than he did later in a dress. Like the fools in the tale of the emperor's new clothes, who persuaded themselves and one another that they didn't see the emperor's nude body, the French courtiers imagined that d'Eon's invisible nude body was what he told them it was (female) and discounted what they actually saw (male). Jacques Lacan remarked on the Chevalier d'Eon in the context of self-referentiality²⁹ and cited Alphonse Allais: "Somebody points at a woman and utters a horrified cry, 'Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she

is totally naked!”³⁰ Lacan argued not that “the emperor has no clothes” but, rather, that “the emperor is naked only beneath his clothes,”³¹ and he applied this scenario to the Chevalier d’Eon, who was indeed naked under his clothes.

The Chevalier created a brazened-out social fiction that no one dared to challenge. Even when he later cross-dressed and behaved in an unabashedly masculine fashion, so that people remarked that d’Eon still seemed more like a man than a woman, even when they noticed that the Chevalière shaved, had a beard, a voice, and a chest like a man, and urinated standing up, still they went along with it. Kates sums up the situation well:

What is amazing about the reactions of [James] Boswell and [Horace] Walpole is that they did not follow their instincts and declare that d’Eon was actually a man dressed as a woman. Rather, despite what they perceived, they identified d’Eon as an Amazon, a thoroughly masculinized woman. They assumed female in what they could *not* see; they perceived male in what they could see. To them, d’Eon was anatomically female, but socially a man.³²

Whereas in fact he was anatomically male, but socially female. Politics, too, supported the masquerade. D’Eon was a spy for many years, living what I would call a double double life, as spy and diplomat and as man and woman. As a spy, he knew how to be what later came to be called, appropriately, a “double penetration agent.” In London, too, he played into the scenario of political double entendre: an article published in England referred to him as “this amphibious being, male in London, female in Paris,” while a piece of doggerel in Paris argued that it was believed (presumably in France) that he was male, but England declared him to be female.³³ Each nation feminized the other and blamed the transvestism, like syphilis, on the other.

This story out of history is about fantasy, sexual fantasy, and d’Eon’s autobiography is a masterpiece of that genre. At times his life reads like a French

comedy, and there is much irony in the fact that one of the players in this drama was Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, the author of the play *The Marriage of Figaro*, in which the page Cherubino (always played by a woman in the opera version of the story) is dressed in women's clothing. Beaumarchais not only thought that d'Eon was a woman but spread the rumor that he and d'Eon were in love and contemplating marriage and, later, that d'Eon was trying to marry him. Most significantly, Beaumarchais negotiated the document in which Louis XVI announced that d'Eon was a woman. But the true genre of the work of art that d'Eon made of his life was not slapstick or opera buffo but myth; he created a myth of his birth and an imaginary childhood. The story he told was the widespread tale of a daughter whose impoverished parents made her dress as a son:

[A]ccording to d'Eon, his father squandered whatever he found in his wife's dowry, and by the mid-1720's was in debt up to his ears. The way out of debt, it turned out, was to have a son. Françoise's family will stipulated that a large inheritance of some 400 louis would go to the d'Eon family only if Françoise had a son....Although born female, the new infant was to be raised from the start as a boy....Thus according to d'Eon, he was born female, but he never knew what it was like to exist as a girl because from the first breath his family raised him as a son.³⁴

The tale of the girl raised as a boy is a story that has been told, and retold, for many centuries in many cultures; it is, that is to say, a myth in the classical sense of the word. Among many others, it is the story of Amba/Shikhandin in the ancient Indian Sanskrit text, the *Mahabharata*, and the plot of the opera *Arabella* (by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal).³⁵ But of course, in the case of d'Eon, none of this was "true." Even the least suspicious of hermeneuts can see that d'Eon was projecting onto other people his own fantasy of self-re-creation.

The central image of d'Eon's androgyny was recognized as mythical even in his time; in September 1777, a London magazine had a picture of d'Eon "with a kind of

gender line running vertically down the middle of his body,”³⁶ just like the depiction of sacred androgynes in India. Myth or history, the Chevalier d’Eon’s triple-cross-dressing led to the eponym *eonism*, coined by Havelock Ellis in 1928 as a synonym for transvestism³⁷ and enshrined in the Oxford English Dictionary: “Transvestism, esp. by a man. So Eonist, one who wears the clothes of the opposite sex.” But they have missed the whole point: he was masquerading in the clothing of the *same* sex. He just had to tell people to imagine the switch on and the switch back; he never even had to change out of his trousers.

A similar trick may have been played on a man who prided himself on his rampant heterosexuality, Giacomo Casanova (1725-98). In his posthumously published memoirs, 1826-38, Casanova describes an encounter with a person named Bellino, who was said to be a castrato and dressed as a man. This is how Casanova describes his reaction to Bellino:

The masculine attire did not prevent my seeing a certain fullness of bosom, which put it into my head that despite the billing, this must be a girl. In this conviction, I made no resistance to the desires which he aroused in me...I could not take my eyes from this being whom my depraved nature impelled me to love and to believe a member of the sex to which it was necessary to my purposes that she should belong...His gestures, the way he moved his eyes, his gait, his bearing, his manner, his face, his voice, and above all my instinct, which I concluded could not make me feel its power for a castrato, all combined to confirm me in my idea.³⁸

Because Casanova desired the castrato, he had to persuade himself that the castrato was a girl; he trusted his groin feeling. Later, however, when Casanova thought he saw a tell-tale bulge in Bellino’s trousers, he became thoroughly confused by what he hoped “was not a monstrous clitoris.”³⁹ But Bellino cut to the heart of the matter, and insisted, “Since

I am a boy, my duty is not to comply in the least with what you demand, for your passion, which is now only natural, would at once become monstrous.”⁴⁰

Where Casanova had seen monstrosity in genitals that were perfectly natural (as male) but monstrously transformed by his projected lust (which made them female), the castrato wisely identified that lust itself as monstrous. But the *absence* of the expected trick turned out, in the end, to be the ultimate trick. Bellino turned out not to be a castrato after all; he explained the trick, an elaborate sort of padding in the groin, and the reason for it: he was a girl, but his mother had thought it a good plan to continue passing him off as a man, for she hoped she could send him to Rome to sing.⁴¹ So Casanova’s instincts were right all along; Bellino really was a girl. Or was he? Was Bellino telling the truth? We can immediately recognize the myth told by the Chevalier (or Chevalière) d’Eon⁴² and all the others. We may therefore take seriously the possibility that Bellino was lying when he said he was a girl, taking the old story and pretending that it was the story of his life; that he really was a castrato and that, therefore, Casanova was wrong. Bellino may have been a boy pretending to be a girl pretending to be a castrato.

In 1970 the *Times* of London called *eonism* nothing but a “minor deviation.”⁴³ After all, he was French. Oddly enough, the victim of another Eonist was also French: Bernard Boursicot lived for two decades with a Chinese man named Shi Peipu, who persuaded him that he was a woman pretending to be a man.⁴⁴ It was, of course, only a matter of time before the true story of Boursicot and Shi Peipu became first a play and then a film, both named *M. Butterfly*. At the end of the play, after dressing as the Shi Peipu figure playing the part of Madama Butterfly in the Puccini opera, the Bernard Boursicot figure eviscerates himself, just as Madama Butterfly is usually depicted as

doing (when her lover sails away), imitating her father's ritual suicide in the manner of a traditional Japanese warrior. Thus the Frenchman is imitating a Chinese man (Song) who imitated a Chinese woman (Song) imitating a Japanese woman (Madama Butterfly) who imitated a Japanese man (her father). This act moves the identity and power from male to female and back again in a manner that finally erases the gender (and Orientalist) categories altogether.

The fourth wall between the play and the audience was often breached in this regard. We all know now (and many people knew then) that a triple cross was at work when the gay Roy Harold Scherer, Jr., a.k.a., Rock Hudson, pretended to be a straight man (Rock Hudson) acting the part of a straight man (Brad Allen) who pretended to be a gay man (Rex Stetson) in *Pillow Talk* (1959).⁴⁵ (When Brad says, "I don't know how much longer I can keep up this act," he is speaking on several levels.) Men in drag imitated the great sex queens like Mae West, but Mae West (who never wore male drag) became, particularly as she aged, a self-parody, regarded as an imitation of a man imitating her, "the greatest female impersonator of all time."⁴⁶ Outside the frame of the stage and the page, people often triple-cross-dress as their true genders. When Gloria Steinem was given a 1973 award from Harvard's Hasty Pudding (a prize often given to cross-dressed actors and actresses, as Hasty Pudding specializes in drag shows), she remarked, "I don't mind drag—women have been female impersonators for some time." And Marjorie Garber comments that transvestism shows us that "*all* women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artifacts,"⁴⁷ or, as Elaine Showalter puts it, "[W]omanliness' is the putting on of veils, only 'masquerading in feminine guise.'"⁴⁸ It could be argued and has been argued that every woman since Pandora has masqueraded

as herself, concealing within the deceptive superficial image of a woman the true nature of—a woman. Here is a gendered double standard: although some men may masquerade as women, the feminist claim is that drag is overwhelmingly female drag.

In 1929, Joan Rivière published her article “Womanliness as Masquerade,” in which she argued that womanliness “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove he has not the stolen goods.” And therefore, she concluded, there was no difference at all between “genuine womanliness” and the “masquerade.”⁴⁹ Lacan reacted to and expanded upon Rivière: “The fact that femininity takes refuge in this mask ... has the strange consequence that, in the human being, virile display itself appears as feminine.”⁵⁰ The Lacanian reading also argues that a woman is a man from whom something is missing (a man who is “castrated”) and who masquerades in order to conceal this lack, using her own body as a disguise. This prompted Judith Butler to suggest that masquerade might construct this exaggerated femininity in order to disguise bisexual possibilities that threaten the assumed heterosexual basis of the masquerade.⁵¹ And Mary Ann Doane points out that Rivière ignored the joyful and playful aspects of this masquerade, limiting it to its anxious and painful aspects.⁵² Our texts give equal time to the playful and the painful aspects of the gender masquerade, though different cultures weight them differently, Shakespeare, for instance, emphasizing the playful (in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*), Hollywood in the 90’s the painful—*The Crying Game* (1992), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999). The gender masquerade may also be used to deconstruct the idea of gender entirely or merely to invalidate one particular gender. A woman who dressed as a man

remarked, “I suppose I could wear dresses, but then I think I would just look like a man dressed in drag... If I dress up and put on high heels, or makeup, or things like that, they will call me madame. But I’m not going to be a transvestite to myself.” And Holly Devor, who interviewed her and other women who habitually dressed as men, comments, “One is left wondering whether these women believed that average women, in the course of their normal everyday lives, look like transvestites and prostitutes....Sadly, their view of ‘typical females’ was tainted by misogyny.”⁵³ Or I would say, by a certain sort of mythology.

¹ Interview in *Cape Cod Times*, Saturday, July 13, C2. More precisely, in 2002, Vidal said, “Yes, I turned him down on the ground that he was not right for an Adlai Stevenson-style politician while Melvyn Douglas was. The joke has been refashioned over the years.”

² Ronald Reagan, with Richard G. Hubler. *Where’s the Rest of Me? The Autobiography of Ronald Reagan* (New York : Karz Publishers, 1981), 137.

³ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 485-6.

⁴ Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 164.

⁵ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan*, 486.

⁶ John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 338.

⁷ I’m grateful to Lorraine Daston for telling me about this incident and offering her own wise analysis of it. Still more bizarre, but less amusing, is the report that Reagan had told Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, during his November 29, 1983, visit to the White House, and Simon Wiesenthal, on a February 16, 1984, visit that he had photographed the Nazi death camps. Cannon, 487. Reagan later denied this story and said merely that he had seen “secret” films of Eisenhower’s visit to the town of Ohrdruf on April 12, 1945, a week after its liberation. In fact, he had seen a film that was widely viewed throughout the U.S. at that time.

⁸ Personal communication from Mike Macdonald, September, 2002.

⁹ Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 167.

-
- ¹⁰ David Thompson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Third Edition. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), 617-18.
- ¹¹ Anthony Lane, "Metal Guru: Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines," *New Yorker*, July 14 and 21, 2003, 85-86.
- ¹² Dean E. Murphy, "An Actor, Yes, but No Reagan." *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 10, sec. 4,1.
- ¹³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 325.
- ¹⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁵ Elaine K. Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁶ William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 223.
- ¹⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 235.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.
- ¹⁹ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 16, 337-8, 243.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ²¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "White Like Me," *New Yorker*, June 17, 1996, 76-77.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 68.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ²⁴ This was inferred by, among others, Sanford Pinsker, in *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, June 23, 2003; Bob Hoover, in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Sunday, May 28, 2000; Marion Kilcoyne, in the *Sunday Business Post*, Sunday, May 28, 2000.
- ²⁵ Ursula Heise, in "Transvestism and the Stage Controversy in Spain and England, 1580-1680" (*Theatre Journal* 44 (1992), 357-74), 372-4, summarizes the edition edited by Francisco Ayala (Madrid: Castalia, 1989). I am grateful to Stephen Orgel for telling me about this play.
- ²⁶ Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
- ²⁷ Cynthia Cox, *The Enigma of the Age*, cited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, "Notes on Lacan," 93. Gary Kates regards this Russian drag as a fantasy.
- ²⁸ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman*, 67, 75, 257.
- ²⁹ He mentions the Chevalier in his seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter"; see also John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, "Notes on Lacan," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 93.
- ³⁰ Jacques Lacan, 1986 seminar, "The ethic of psychoanalysis," cited by Slavoj Zizek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" 28-9.
- ³¹ Slavoj Zizek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 28-9.
- ³² Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman*, 256, 38, 256.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 67, 37, 44-45, 220, 223, 257, 4, 221, 47.
- ³⁴ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman*, 47-8.

³⁵ The same story was told by Shi Peipu and by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal about their heroine Zdenka/o in *Arabella*; Doniger, *The Bedtrick*, 340-42, 370. It was also told in ancient India about Amba/Shikhandin and Ila; Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 271-8, 281-6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷ “It was clearly a typical case of what Hirschfeld later termed ‘transvestism’ and what I would call ‘sexo-aesthetic inversion’, or more simply, ‘Eonism.’ ...The Eonist (though sometimes emphatically of the apparent sex) sometimes shows real physical approximations towards the opposite sex.” Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 7, i. 10, 12.

³⁸ Casanova, *History of My Life* (trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), vol. 6, 2, 1.5-6, 15, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 1.17-18, 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 1.10-21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.1.17-18, 20.

⁴² Gary Kates, *Monsieur d’Eon Is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade*. New York: Basic Books, 1995; Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁴³ *London Times*, 5 September, 1970, sec. 8, 4. It also called the Chevalier “an a-sexual transvestite.”

⁴⁴ Doniger, *The Bedtrick*, 369-72.

⁴⁵ Cary Grant, in an earlier age, never came out of the closet, if indeed he was ever inside it. But he got into drag in many of his films, notably *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *My Favorite Wife* (1940), and *I Was a Male War Bride* (Howard Hawks, 1949).

⁴⁶ Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: The Bisexuality of Everyday Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 150; 52, citing the journalist George Davis.

⁴⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 65, 49.

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 168.

⁴⁹ Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy* (New York: Methuen, 1986, edited by Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan), 35-44.

⁵⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École freudienne* (edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose; translated by Jacqueline Rose. New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 85.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, “Lacan, Riviere, and the Strategies of Masquerade,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Ideas* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 47.

⁵² Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 38.

⁵³ Holly Devor, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 128, 130.