"Something is rotten in the state of Shee-lande"
Aspects of Gender in a Dystopia from Shakespeare's Age[1]

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In a well-known article published in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1988, Jean E. Howard poses the question, "How many people cross-dressed in Renaissance England?" Howard is ready to acknowledge the problematic nature of the question, yet she argues that whatever the precise number and types of cross-dressing in Renaissance England were, they can be regarded as signs of an ongoing gender-struggle, of a "sex-gender system under pressure"(Howard 1988, 418). Using a material feminist approach, she studies instances of cross-dressing in Renaissance plays, among them Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. Based on her observations, she concludes that such acts of cross-dressing were part of a more general historical demystification through which, according to her, the stage "participated in the historical process eventuating in the English Revolution" (Howard 1988, 436). Howard's arguments are all the more convincing because of their remarkably restrained nature. In many cases, cross-dressing by female characters is eventually seen by her as yet another means of containment, or recuperation; so to say, an inverse reinforcement of a subordinating patriarchal system. Nonetheless, one should note that the literary critic here uses literary texts to draw a rather far-reaching historical conclusion.

Eight years later, the question was revisited by the historian David Cressy. As the representative of another discipline, his perspective is fundamentally different. First of all, like Howard, he also refers to the high number of polemical works written against cross-dressing at the time. However, while Howard takes these at face value, and sees in them

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powerful yet reactionary indicators of the quoted pressure on the sex-gender system, Cressy juxtaposes archival sources to these and arrives to a surprising conclusion. In law cases against cross-dressers, sentences were remarkably mild, which suggests that in the eyes of the authorities, cross-dressing was not necessarily considered as dangerous a threat as gender-vested accounts of the phenomena may suggest. With a subtle shift of focus – he deals with male-to-female cross-dressing – Cressy also offers a re-evaluation of cross-dressing in theatre. He finds that directly contrary to Howard's observations, the effect of male cross-dressing on the stage was not the effemination of the male character, but instead, the privileged spheres thus accessed became a source of additional male arousal. Eventually, in a somewhat pointed way, Cressy concludes that "neither the records of ecclesiastical justice nor the London comedies reveal … a sex-gender system in crisis" (Cressy 1996, 464).

Both authors refer to the anti-theatrical, moralising Puritan polemic literature of the period (Gosson, Stubbes, Prynne), and also both of them use plays to support their arguments. As one involved in early modern utopian literature, I found that a certain English utopia, less discussed in the otherwise abundant secondary literature on utopias, has something to contribute to this debate. Let me thus give but a brief introduction to this text, and then provide just a short hint at its possible role in this question.

Hall's text

The book entitled "*Mundus alter et idem*" appeared in late 1605 or early 1606, with the author given as "The English Mercury" and purportedly published in Frankfort. In fact, it was written by Joseph Hall, and the place of the publication was beyond doubt London. The Latin text was translated into English by John Haley in 1609, and in my presentation I will use this translation (or as the modern editor calls it, *adaptation*) because it appears to be more directly connected to the supposed debate on cross-dressing, which, based on the sources used

by both Howard and Cressy, was associated with the more popular vernacular culture. *The Discovery of a New World*, as the English title runs, is a fictional travel book, offering an exhaustive account of the protagonist's travels to Terra Australis Incognita. It is divided into four **books**, and its narrative, or to be more precise, descriptive parts are preceded by a highly rhetorical dialogue about the uselessness of travel. Wherever the unwilling traveller goes, he encounters a world turned upside down, where vices are turned into virtues, and they are carried to the extremes. The four lands visited are:

1. Tenter-belly: cornucopia, Land of Cokaygne tradition
2. Shee-lande: Land of Women, to be discussed in detail
3. Fooliana: Land of fools; Swift
4. Thee-uingen: Land of Thieves

Each of the lands is described in a manner loosely reminiscent of the second book of Thomas More's *Utopia*, with accounts of some of the major cities of the regions, and sections on warfare, laws, religion, and other, seemingly serious matters. However, from the beginning till the end, the tone is one of harsh satire, which at times turns into a more grotesque, dark strain, revealing a basically moralistic purpose working in the background.

Book II.

The book about the land of women is divided into seven chapters. The first one is a rather short general description of the land, but it already contains an ambivalent remark: "The soil thereof is very fruitful, but badly husbanded." The sentence, as a general opinion about the country, is problematic from several aspects. First, conventional utopias are descriptions of paradise-like lands of plenty, which become all the more efficient through human (or rather, utopian?) agency. Inserted carefully amongst monotonous descriptive sentences, and placed at the beginning of the description of the woman's land, the sentence

suggests a feeling of 'missed chance.' And the root cause of this, with a play on the powerful ambiguity in the meaning of the word "husbanded" is the lack of proper cultivation – or the lack of enough husbands?

And as we move on to chapter 2, the narrator's position is further complicated. Since he arrives from the land of the arch-enemies of the women, he receives a rather cold welcome, and only the name and the fame of his country can save him: "Well to warde I went, and but that my countries name (the true Paradise of women) pleaded for me, I had never come home alive" (Hall 1609, 100). According to the notes of the best available scholarly edition of the text, the concept of England as a paradise of women goes back to a saying which was, probably not surprisingly, popular in the 1590s, "England is the paradise of women, the purgatory of men [in some versions: servants], and the hell of horses." In Haley's version, a marginal note is added, pointing to France as the origin of this proverb. Despite England's favourable gender reputation, the narrator has to accept certain laws. These laws, incorporated into the text, open a window upon general stereotypes about women in the age, as they reflect a bunch of supposed female desires, to name a few: the possibility of talking without interruption, being the ruler of the house, male constancy and monogamy, a respect for female privacy. From the perspective of the narrator's position, probably the last law is the most important:

> That I should continually give women the prick and praise for beauty, wit and eloquence, and defend it against all men (Hall 1609, 101-102).

That means that the narrator accepts a law which requires him to endlessly praise women, and this at the very beginning of a book dedicated to the description of the land of Women. Unfortunately, the exciting ambiguity is somewhat ruined by the pedantic narrator, and further destroyed by the awkward contemporary translator, who, in a somewhat didactic fashion, (over)explains this problematic position:

> This oth I willingly tooke, and would have taken one ten times stricter, rather then have stayed there. So therefore you see my tongue is tied by mine oth, not to tell all the fine conundrums I saw among these mad wenches. Somewhat I may say, but no harme, no more I would in truth, if I had not beene sworne at all (Hall 1609, 102).

The next chapter offers the first detailed account of the conditions in Shee-land, with a brief description about the form of the government and the elections. A rather corrupt and totally confuse, inconstant system is introduced here, where the two most important virtues are Beauty and Eloquence. The fourth chapter is about the origins of the inhabitants of the land, and here we have to stop for a second, as we encounter an apparent contradiction in the logic of the text. The narrator escaped prison because England is a paradise of women. But here we learn that the land is mostly populated by people escaping voluntarily from other lands. And there are so many of these volunteers, that the narrator is much concerned about the women of England. Should they gather information about this land, there would be "no female that will bide amongst us", and therefore the secret must be kept "undiscovered from our giddy females, unless we can find a better means of generation" (Hall 1609, 106). So, even though England is a paradise for women, every women of the country would leave it for Shee-land. The contradiction may suggest that the legal constraints imposed upon the narrator are working, not letting him to write about the land in a tone that is not of the highest praise. And the effect of this restrictive "narrative filter" is even more evident in the fifth chapter (*Of Gygglot-tangyr,* in the Latin: *Aphrodysia*), where, amidst the introductory sentences dealing with the delicate scents flying around, we read "The rest I omit" (Hall 1609, 107). The sentence is placed here like a well-hidden mine on a seemingly peaceful meadow. It is not prepared, and here, where it would be desirable, no explanation whatsoever is provided, and thus it is perfectly able to raise the suspicion of the reader. Something is left untold, but no clue is given as to what it could be.

More important for the present discussion are the final two chapters of Book II. The title of chapter six is *Of Double-Sex Isle, otherwise called Skrat or Hermaphrodite Island*. It

presents a land where everything has a "double kind," even nature itself is full of weird dualities. Yet, it is the inhabitants of this island which are directly relevant to the issue of cross-dressing:

> Those that bare the most man about them, wore spurres, bootes and britches from the heels to the hanshes: and bodies, rebates and periwigges from the crupper to the crowne; and for those that were the better sharers in woman kind, they weare doublets to the rumpe, and skirts to the remainder. (Hall 1609, 111)

As the quotation reveals, there is a certain type of cross-dressing here, but it is somewhat different from the type discussed in the articles mentioned earlier. On one hand, this cross-dressing is not a means of shifting gender, rather an outward sign of blurred gender distinctions (in fact, everybody simultaneously wears both male and female clothes, everybody is cross-dressing). On the other hand, this cross-dressing is standard and universal on the island, presented as something exotic only through the eye of the beholder. Interestingly, the issue is not related at all to the supposed contemporary debate, despite the references to England in the previous parts of the book, and despite evidence from other works by Hall testifying to his contempt for cross-dressing. Both in his early satirical work *Virgidemiarum*, and in his later sermons, he engages in attacks against cross-dressers, and at least in one place he refers to them as "the hermaphrodites of our times" (Millar-Wands 1981, 158 [notes]). If I add here that in some of the polemic works referred to by Cressy and Howard, the same term is used for cross-dressers, than it becomes obvious that this part of the work has something to contribute to the question of Renaissance cross-dressing.[2]

The last chapter of Book II is about *Shrewes-bourg*. This is a land where not the sexes but the gender roles are interchanged. Women are the rulers of the house, they fight wars,

[2] One example from (Howard 1988, 425): "For when women "catch the bridle in their teeth, and runne away with their Rulers, they care not into what dangers they plunge either their Fortunes or Reputations" (C2); consequently, those who are "Fathers, Husbands, or Sustainers of these new Hermaphrodites" (C2V) must keep them in order, forbid the buying of such outrageous apparel, and instruct them in the virtues which are women's best ornaments." Howard quotes here from the so-called *Hic Mulier* tract (published in 1620).

while men are responsible for the house-work, and in all other respects, they are subjected to these Amazon-like women. From the perspective of gender issues, probably this is the most interesting part of Hall's book. The shift of roles evidently raises empathy in the narrator, but most of the time, one feels that this empathy is reserved for the effeminated men, so cruelly humiliated by the roles imposed upon them. Nonetheless, there is one short episode where through this shift of perspective, the narrator ostensibly becomes capable of being sensitive to concerns of the other side as well. At one point, we read:

> Now you would thinke it incredible if I should tell you of the neatnesse of their houses, yet the men are all their drudges to wash, wipe, scoure and sweepe all that is done: yea and dresse all the meate besides: so that I imagine that it is but mans esteeme of the undecency of susch bussinesses, (not any of his unablenesse to discharge them) that makes him eschew such employments. (Hall 1609, 118-9)

Here the narrator seems to come close to realising that male and female roles are not necessarily determined by biological sex, but they are culturally and politically sanctioned. And this rather attractive stance is reinforced by other works of Hall. According to the modern editor, in one of his sermons entitled *The Women's Veil*, Hall condems the men who rule over their wives in a tyrannic fashion rendering them to the level of slaves (Millar-Wands 1981, 159).

Conclusion

To sum up, Joseph Hall's satyric dystopia, and especially its part concerned with the Land of Women seems to be informed by contemporary gender issues, and, more specifically by the topic of cross-dressing. Some remarks by the narrator may also suggest that Hall's stance was in some respects relatively progressive. However, this is the point where we must keep calm, and recall the problematic positioning of the narrator. Let me repeat here that the narrator escapes prison on the condition that he "should continually give women the prick and praise for beauty, wit and eloquence, and defend it against all men". Whenever we read about

the praise of women, or the defense of them, we should bear in mind this ambiguous position. And since Hall is obviously a master of rhetoric, ambiguity is masterfully created and maintained throughout the book, so that one can never be completely sure as to what is in jest, what is in earnest.

Unfortunately, as yet I myself could not decide, how all this relates to the debate cited at the beginning of my presentation. Further work must be done in order to reveal whether Hall's description of a land ruled by women support Howards more radical or Cressy's more conservative position. During this work, Hall's other works should also be examined in details, and there are other steps to complete, like relating the book to Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* and other similar works. However, hopefully it became clear from my presentation that Hall's text and its contemporary English rendering are rich sources for a deeper understanding of some issues related to gender in Shakespeare's time.

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