

Elizabeth Bishop's MAD HATTERS: "Exchanging Hats" AND GENDER AMBIGUITY

OS CHAPELEIROS MALUCOS de Elizabeth Bishop:

“EXCHANGING HATS” E A AMBIGUIDADE DE GÊNERO

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Resumo

O poema “Exchanging hats”, no conjunto da obra de Elizabeth Bishop, é uma exposição do que Judith Butler chama problema de gênero. Dando ênfase para a ambiguidade de gênero e o tom irônico revelado na voz lírica, o poema dramatiza e complica a performatividade da construção de gêneros.

Palavras-chave: *Elizabeth Bishop, Gênero, Performatividade.*

Abstract

The poem "Exchanging hats", in Elizabeth Bishop's body of work, is an exposition of what Judith Butler calls gender trouble. Giving emphasis to gender ambiguity and the ironic tone revealed in the lyrical voice, the poem dramatises and complicates the performativity of gender constructions.

Key words: *Elizabeth Bishop, Gender, Performativity.*

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry has usually been associated with the themes of travelling and displacement. At least two of her books, *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1978), are almost entirely dedicated to this subject, which can also be found sparsely in her other publications. The issue of gender and sexuality, however, if not so conspicuous in her poetry, still remains an important key to understanding Bishop's work. A poem like "Exchanging Hats",

published in 1979, is one which deals in quite a straightforward manner with the subject matter of gender. Although there are authors who suggest that “Bishop uses the theatricality of verse to simultaneously unveil and disguise her unorthodox identity” (Lombardi, 1995, p. 65), thus bridging the gap between the ‘author’ and the text, I will not insist, in this article, on this line of thought. My reading of gender and sexuality in “Exchanging Hats” requires that we see the poem not as an expression of Bishop’s sexuality, but that we focus on the discursive elements that create performances, masks, masquerades under which lies no essential truth about the author, but that *perform* the very impossibility of reaching such truth.

“Exchanging Hats” is paradigmatic of what Judith Butler (1990) calls ‘gender trouble’. This article proposes, then, a reading of the poem which emphasises gender ambiguity and ironic tone in an attempt to show that “Exchanging Hats” dramatises and complicates the performativity of gender constructions, as its ambiguous lyrical voice moves from identification to detachment in relation to the “aunts” and “uncles” addressed to in the poem. The lyrical voice’s ambiguity is seen here as a result of the use of irony, which, at the same time, creates an identification of this voice with the subversive practices of sexuality (notably homoerotic) and produces a sense of segregation in relation to them. The act of ‘wearing’ hats, of dressing up, of creating a performance that eventually problematizes the disjunction nature X culture and the notion of essential identities is a trace that “Exchanging Hats” shares with another of Bishop’s poems: “Pink Dog”.

In “Pink Dog,” as Catherine Cucinella (2002) remarks, “body, sexuality, and gender all inhabit and embody the monstrous and the grotesque” (p. 73), complementing that, in this work, “the poetic body complicates the binary structures of mind/body, sex/gender, male/female, and culture/nature because as the abject body it collapses meaning, signifies liminality, and refuses stasis” (p. 78). The poem describes a female dog trotting on an avenue during *carnaval*. The dog’s body, pink, hairless, covered in scabies is put side by side with “beggars”, “idiots, paralytics, parasites”. The lyrical voice suggests that the dog covers up her body, so that passers-by would throw her in the “tidal rivers”.

Now look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a *fantasía*.
Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-
n eyesore... But no one will ever see a

dog in *máscara* this time of year.
Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.

What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?

They say that Carnival's degenerating
— radios, Americans, or something,
have ruined it completely. They're just talking.

Carnival is always wonderful!
A depilated dog would not look well.
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!

This is the body that has to be “dressed up” for *carnaval*, an abject body that the poem both ‘shows’ and ‘conceals’ under ‘masks’ (*máscaras*) and ‘costumes’ (*fantasia*). Cucinella (2002) reads the speaker's insistence that the dog wears “*a fantasia*” as “an awareness of the cultural pressures to contain, control, and discipline the abject body and its excesses” (p. 82). There is excess, still, in the very use of the words *fantasia* and *máscara* in Portuguese. The lyrical voice operates another masquerade, ‘wearing’ a foreign language that destabilises the ‘natural’ flow of the English language. More specifically, the choice for the vocable *fantasia* adds another layer of meaning – besides ‘costume’, it also means ‘fantasy’, ‘illusion’. Fundamentally, “Pink Dog” “suggests the visibility of the body. It also points to the fantasy that underwrites notions of an unmediated body and to the fiction that insists on a coherent sexual identity” (Cucinella, 2002, p. 82).

A similar debunking of such notions can be seen in “Exchanging Hats”. Formally, the poem comprises 8 stanzas of 4 verses with a reasonable rhyming pattern (ABBA). Even though free verse and white verse were nothing new to Bishop by the time she wrote her poems, she also used traditional forms such as sonnet (the 1979 “Sonnet” “Caught – the bubble / in the spirit-level / a creature divided”, for example), sestina (“Sestina”, beginning “September rain falls on the house”), songs (“Songs for a Colored Singer”) and rhymed verse. The structural characteristics of “Exchanging Hats” are not, therefore, novelty in the context of the poet's work.

In the poem, a first-person plural voice speaks to “unfunny uncles”, “anandrous aunts”, an indefinite “you”, an “unfunny uncle” and an “aunt exemplary and slim”. The form of the poem is not dialogical, for the addressees are not given a voice. The lyrical voice's tone is reproofing; the words used to refer to the “aunts” and “uncles” are negative: unfunny, anandrous (a fancy way to say barren, since in biology anandrous refers to certain female flowers that do not have the pollen-bearing organ), avernal (pertaining to Avernus, a lake in Italy, well-known for its poisonous vapours, which can be related to the infernal regions). The monological structure, lacking the response of the interlocutors, functions as a description of them. Thus, the lyrical voice, more than talking to is

actually creating through language those taking part in the poem. This genesis, as I will try to discuss later, is not unproblematic.

The title is, perhaps, the first straightforward element to introduce the theme of gender and homosexuality. "Exchanging Hats" can be understood in the poem as 'exchanging sexual roles'. The poet uses the metaphor throughout the poem, as the "aunts" and "uncles" are presented trying on and/or wearing hats usually associated with the opposite sex. It is thus that "uncles" wear a "lady's hat" and "aunts" the "yachtsmen's caps".

This relation between gender ("custom") and dressing up ("costume") is on the core of Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender identity. Her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* problematises gender as a category of essence. Her main argument is that gender is not constructed socially, but is, rather, a kind of show, a performance we stage, thus, impossible to essentialise. She says

Acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler, 1990, p. 136).

Gender, in this sense, is a category that is related much more to what one does than to one is. The performance can reiterate or subvert the traditional roles asserted by hegemonic heterosexual configuration. Such configuration, Butler argues, is hegemonic because it is repeated as a model for behaviour and this repetition "is at once the reenactment and reexperiencing of meaning already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation" (1990, p. 140).

Butler resorts to subversive performances to, following a Foucaultian matrix, question the supposedly stable links among sex, gender and desire that imply they are caused by invariable factors. On the opposite, they are free-floating and inconstant. Gender as performance denies the existence of a referential identity and to call for a true gender is to impose a set of regulatory practises that aim to limit sexuality to "frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (1990, p. 180).

Drag queens are exemplary of the complications that ensue from gender performativity. Drag performances reveal the imitative and fictive nature of gender for drag imitations are nothing else than the disclosure of the fact that all identity is, in fact, a simulation. As Tim Dean (2000) expertly summarises,

gender *reality*, by which Butler means a gender identity bearing the force of ontology, essence and inwardness, is demystified by drag and shown to be the effect of performances at once gestural and discursive – both acts and speech acts (p. 75).

Putting on a 'show' that defies gender assignment according to 'normal' sexual roles is a transgressive act that calls attention to how much is invested in the 'naturalisation' of gender.

Bishop's poem seems to be a very fruitful site for the discussion of Butler's theory. In "Exchanging Hats" we have the gendering of subjects through a very specific act of performance: putting on hats. It is the act of dressing up that problematises sexuality.

The poem starts with the lyrical voice addressing the "unfunny uncles who insist / in trying on a lady's hat". As we can see, from the very beginning, the problem of one's attempt to diverge from the rule is introduced by the use of the verb 'to insist'. It is possible to read this insistence as the reiteration of a subversive act of transgendering: the uncles will not wear regular men's head garments, but those ascribed by the conventionality of custom to the ladies. And the "anandrous aunts", in line 9, are also presented as problematising sexual roles since they also persevere in wearing "yachtsmen's caps". The first four stanzas, consequently, constitute a parallelism, as "aunts" and "uncles" are presented as inverted mirror images, in opposition to each other, wearing each other's hats.

Although the two main addressees of the lyrical voice are the "uncles" and "aunts", in line 17 it speaks to an uncertain "you", who is ungendered. This "you" suggests an ambiguous and carnivalesque act of transvestism: it wears a "paper plate", "grapes" (an immediate reference to Carmen Miranda, a gay icon, one of the favourite personalities for female impersonators) and "the Indian's feather bonnet", none of which is a 'traditional' hat. In this sense, the act of wearing a hat complicates even more the established heterosexual models, as the "you" is the paragon of gender

indeterminacy: there is no he or she, male or female referents, only the total blurring of sexual roles.

In the sixth stanza the lyrical voice questions the consequences of the changes for the ruling power of society. If "the opera hats collapse", that is, if high art standards are no longer valid; if "crowns grow draughty", meaning, if political power becomes unstable; then "he" may question "what might a miter matter", what relevance could religious powers have in a world where values are being put at stake by alternative sexual configurations. The world will not function if hats are not worn right. Again, the suggestion that an act of transvestism is what, at the same time, guarantees and destabilises 'normalcy' goes hand in hand with Butler's critique of gender identity.

In the last two stanzas, however, there seems to be a slight shift in the way the lyrical voice treats the addressees. In lieu of "uncles" we now have a single "uncle". This "uncle" is not wearing a lady's hat, but a fedora, a typically male hat. But this confluence of custom and costume is questioned: the "uncle", the voice in the poem says, used to wear a "hat too big, or one too many", that is, once he was also a mad hatter. And even though his costume now conforms to the social rules, the voice still asks "are there any / stars under your black fedora?" The question implies the possibility of an eccentric personality hidden under the hat, as if the garment were just a mask to conceal "perversities". In the next stanza, the lyrical voice wonders "what slow changes" the stars have witnessed under "their vast, shady, turned-down brim." The fedora's brim serves as a refuge, dark and insulated, away from public observation for the stars to continue shining. Once again, we can see how the "uncle", by putting on a performance, in this case, creates an illusive show that reveals the containment of gender subversion. I use the expression containment here in the sense Jonathan Dollimore (1989) employs it in *Radical Tragedy*. Containment refers to the possibility of a work of art (or more specifically, in his work, of a play) to present threats to the *status quo*, contain them and restore the order. However, Dollimore argues, "to contain a threat ... one must first give it a voice, a part, a presence – in the theatre, as in the culture" (1989, p. xxi). The very containment of subversive acts opens the possibility to resistance as such acts become apparent. Borrowing the expression from Dollimore I here imply that the fact that the black fedora is used to hide away the "uncle's" "stars" provides an opportunity to see resistance, once we understand the operations of custom directed to people to conform with the norm. In a way, we only notice that the "uncle" has "stars" under his hat because it was necessary to wear the fedora to hide them. Here, the act of subversion is apparent thanks to the attempt to contain it.

It is relevant to notice that the lyrical voice itself is also construing a performance. In first place, it is a first-person plural voice. One may question who is speaking through the lyrical voice, who is this "we". It could be the voice of society and its regulatory nature. As I argued before, the tone is reproving, so it could immediately relate to 'preaching' against insurgent acts. However, the reproach is ambiguously presented and the attitude is extremely ironic. In line 4, the voice assumes certain identification with the transgenering model: "we share your slight transvestite twist". However, it confesses in line 5 the embarrassment of such identification ("in spite of our embarrassment"). The deferral of denial, from the first to second stanza is ironic insofar as we are led to believe that the lyrical voice is also 'exchanging hats', until we get to the next stanza. Then it reveals its true attitude towards the "uncles": abashment.

1. Unfunny uncles who insist
2. in trying on a lady's hat,
3. oh, even if the joke falls flat,
4. we share your slight transvestite twist

5. in spite of our embarrassment.
6. Costume and custom are complex.
7. The headgear of the other sex
8. inspires us to experiment.

Maybe the best instance of gender performativity can be found in lines 7 and 8. "The headgear of the other sex / inspires us to experiment": it is costume, that is, the performance we put on, that invites the construction of sexuality, rather than custom. Judith Butler (1990) emphasises that "gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible" (p. 180). It is the very performance that constructs gender identity that can demonstrate gender's constructiveness.

Elizabeth Bishop's poem, then, not only highlights the 'troubles' we face performing gender, but it also suggests the transgression of identity 'customs' (understood as the official department that administers and collects the duties imposed by a government on imported goods), the regulatory powers that control the flux from one gender to another, that decide what can 'go through' gender limits. In this sense, all gender identity is 'bootlegged', it is pirated, never an original, or essential nature. Bishop's "uncles" and "aunts" smuggle hats, exchange positions and show us how complex costumes and custom are.

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Appendage (Anexo)

Exchanging Hats

Elizabeth Bishop

1. Unfunny uncles who insist
2. in trying on a lady's hat,
3. oh, even if the joke falls flat,
4. we share your slight transvestite twist

5. in spite of our embarrassment.
6. Costume and custom are complex.
7. The headgear of the other sex
8. inspires us to experiment.

9. Anandrous aunts, who, at the beach
10. with paper plates upon your laps,
11. keep putting on the yachtsmen's caps
12. with exhibitionistic screech,

13. the visor hanging o'er the ear

14. so that the golden anchors drag,
15. the tides of fashion never lag.
16. Such caps may not be worn next year.

17. Or you who don the paper plate
18. itself, and put some grapes upon it,
19. or sport the Indian's feather bonnet.
20. perversities may aggravate

21. the natural madness of the hatter.
22. And if the opera hats collapse
23. and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps,
24. he thinks what might a miter matter?

25. Unfunny uncle, you who wore a
26. hat too big, or one too many,
27. tell us, can't you, are there any
28. stars under your black fedora?

29. Aunt exemplary and slim,
30. with averted eyes, we wonder
31. what slow changes they see under
32. their vast, shady, turned-down brim.