

## From Modesty to Stage Fright: Disordering Gender in Shakespearean Performance

Looking closely at Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, this paper explores how representations of male shyness provide a gendered critique of naturalism as that theatrical innovation began to define itself in relation to the performance of masculinity both on the early modern stage and in the all-male court. *Coriolanus* offers a critical meditation on what Judith Butler has identified as the "performance of gender," as the performance of masculinity became increasingly founded on developing male norms of modesty, inhibition, and emotional restraint. As these modalities of civility came to define an ideological construction of male theatrical naturalism, they, rather ironically, gave way to a gendered performance that appeared more unnatural, scripted, and artificial. By conversely implicating characters like the bashful and stage-frightened *Coriolanus* in experiences of emotional realism, rather than truncated male 'naturalism,' Shakespeare's shy male characters come to develop gendered forms of insight and emotional transformation that speak to a dynamic, labile, and indeterminate version of male subjectivity and emotion.

Shakespearean portrayals of male shyness allow for the radical theatrical collapse of the gender binary, ultimately discrediting the character's own belief in the idea of gender as a naturalized and fixed component of the sexed body (i.e., men are born a certain way, so they should act a certain way, present themselves a certain way, and only feel certain emotions). Indeed, rather than operating as a representational platform that brought to life a discursive construction of gender performance and normative masculinity, Shakespearean realism tied to implosions of bashful timidity allow—a la Butler—for the reconstitution of the gendered self. Shakespearean representations of male shyness provoked through the experiential immediacy and affective realism of the early modern stage work to motivate a radical understanding of gender as complex, shifting and fluid, whilst allowing for a more authentic and 'naturalistic' version of masculine feeling and identity to form through the space of theatrical performance.

**Tiffany Hoffman** is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies at the University of Toronto. She also serves as book review editor for *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* (Brill). Her work has been supported by research fellowships at the Osler Library for the History of Medicine (McGill University), and with the Australian Research Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (University of Western Australia). She is currently completing a book project, *Performing Shyness: Social Anxiety and the Theatricality of Emotion on the Shakespearean Stage*. This paper offers a draft segment from this larger study.

# Seminar Details

**Toronto:** 12th October 9pm

**Perth (Aus):** 13th October 9am

**Adelaide:** 13th October 10.30am

**Melbourne:** 13th October 11am

Enrollment via [Eventbrite](#)