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”A woman make a better man”: Butch Masculinity in Peggy Shaw’s *You’re Just Like My Father*

Over the course of Peggy Shaw’s performance career, her name has become synonymous with butchness. As Alisa Solomon observes, “Peggy Shaw, the big butch Split Britches actor...is every feminist critic’s favorite example” (175). In *You’re Just Like My Father*, Shaw’s 1994 solo show, Shaw uses her physicality and genealogy to construct a butch lesbian identity. Gayle Rubin defines butch “as a category of lesbian gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols” (467). Butches layer masculine gender codes onto female bodies—in Shaw’s case, at least. Shaw’s butchness is uninterested in passing; rather, her butchness is predicated on performing her masculinity and her refusal of femininity simultaneously. This performance maintains an ironic tension between her sexed female body and her butch masculinity.

You’re Just Like My Father foregrounds the ways in which both masculinity and the self are constructed and performed. Shaw is the titular “you” in *You’re Just Like My Father*. During the show, she explains, “Quotation marks change the meaning of things; they make ‘em seem more important... They frame meaning, like the name that tries to frame being” (26:20). Here, Shaw emphasizes the power of quotation marks to alter meaning. In *You’re Just Like My Father*, Shaw performs a quotation of herself; that is, during the course of the performance, Shaw is “Peggy Shaw,” the performed persona, rather than Peggy Shaw the person. While *You’re Just Like My Father* has autobiographical roots, with Shaw employing a first-person voice and being named as Peggy and Margaret (of which Peggy is a derivation), Shaw adopts a persona in the

performance of *You're Just Like My Father*; that is, she is "Peggy Shaw"—the performed persona—rather than Peggy Shaw, the performer.

I will begin by looking at Shaw's physicality. As Butler asserts, the way in which one inhabits one's body is gendered, and contributes to one's sense of a permanently gendered self ("Performative" 1). In "Throwing Like a Girl," Iris Marion Young explores specific ways in which bodily movement is gendered. Young observes that generally, women shield their bodies and do not take up much space; men, on the other hand, are more open with their bodies and take up more space (7). At the beginning of *You're Just Like My Father*, Shaw is seated on a chair in profile, bare-chested, with an ace bandage draped over her shoulders. Her bare breasts connote that she is female, and so her expected gender is woman, but her body reads as masculine. Shaw's feet sit flat on the floor, and she hunches over her knees. As Shaw sits up, she drops her hands into her lap, but does not fold them; her knees are apart. Her masculine posture, along with the ace bandage hanging over her shoulders, recalls the image of a (male) boxer with a towel draped around his shoulders. When Shaw stands, her arms hang down at her side and her stance is wide. She walks with an elongated stride and loosely swinging arms. While Shaw's body is female, the way in which she inhabits that body—that is, her physicality—is masculine in the ways that Young describes.

Shaw's masculinity is emphasized by contrast with her female body. This contrast is highlighted when Shaw cites the traditional butch practice of binding. She takes the ace bandage from around her shoulders and uses it to bind her breasts. Because she is standing in profile, one can watch Shaw's chest flatten as she wraps the ace bandage around herself. Shaw's breasts sex her as female and thereby produce an expectation that Shaw will be feminine, but Shaw makes her breasts disappear under her binding. Though binding flattens Shaw's breasts and makes her

appear more masculine, it ironically reminds one that her breasts are there, that they need to be bound because she is female. This contradictory relationship between Shaw's biological female body, which creates the expectation that Shaw will be feminine, and the masculine way in which she inhabits her body is, for Alisa Solomon, central to butchness. In "Not just a passing fancy: notes on butch," Solomon asserts that

the butch reveals the conventions of masculinity while at the same time her self-presentation allows the possibility of femininity, the role she is refusing, to be inferred. ...the butch demonstrates the choice she's refusing and claims the ground she can't have. ... The butch's eroticism comes not from her looking like a man, but from her not being one—that is, from her transgression. (171)

Shaw's butch lesbian gender presentation is transgressive in that it foregrounds the contradiction between her masculinity and the expectation of her femininity (produced by her sexed body). Shaw actively performs this gender transgression not only by embodying butch masculinity, but also by reminding her audience that she is just as capable of performing femininity. During a costume change in *You're Just Like My Father*, Shaw performs a fleeting femme tease. As the lights come up, Shaw faces upstage. She's slipped her shoulders out of her robe, which affords the audience a view of her shoulders, back, and legs. She glances over her shoulder at the audience, but does not look at them directly. As she walks, her steps are smaller, and her hips sway. She lets the robe slip from her body, and daintily drops it from her hand before resuming her masculine carriage. Here, Shaw makes her refusal of femininity apparent, and maintains the tension between her sexed body and her butch masculinity.

In addition to embodying butchness, Shaw accesses masculinity by constructing a genealogy of physical traits between herself and her father. When Shaw begins her

autobiographical narrative, she starts with her parents—in true psychoanalytic fashion. She constructs a hereditary link between herself and her father, focusing on their shared physical attributes. Shaw says,

This is my face, sharp. I look like my father. ‘You look just like your father,’ my mother said. I look like my father when I’m in a good mood. Most lesbians I know really like their father, me included. My father...had a heart condition. ... I got the same heart condition simply ‘cause I knew him so well. He had big hands. I have his big hands. ... My father told me that his father knocked out Joe Louis with his bare hands. (YJLMF 6:10-6:30).

Here, Shaw constructs a corporeal genealogy to identify with her father: she bears a physical resemblance to him, and imbues her hands and heart with patrilineal significance.

Shaw’s cross-gender identification with her father enables her departure from traditional psychoanalytic narratives of subject formation. In *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman writes, “Since the male subject is encouraged to select [the mother] as the locus of his Oedipal desires, and later to replace her with members of the same sex, there are no major interruptions in his erotic life. However, the female subject is obliged to renounce her first object choice [of the mother]..., to replace one parent with the other in [her] psychic register” (141). As Laura A. Harris queries in “Femme/Butch Family Romances: A Queer Dyke Spin on Compulsory Heterosexuality,” “Little boys can indeed manage to marry their mothers; clichés about wife-mother parallels attest to that”; but what happens when little girls want to marry their mothers (74)? Like Freud’s male subject, Shaw never stops desiring the mother, or at least a mother figure, in *You’re Just Like My Father*. She says, “I liked other people’s mothers. ...I liked sitting with them in the kitchen for hours while they flirted with me. ...And I was so full of desire”

(*YJLMF* 15:00-15:30). When Shaw talks about taking her mother out for ice cream, she describes it like a date, saying, “She made me take her to Brigham’s in Harvard Square for the hot fudge sundae. For years after that, every time I saw my mother, she made me take her to Brigham’s in Harvard Square for a hot fudge sundae with marshmallow and nuts. I was her sundae lover” (*JLMF* 15:43-16:00). To borrow Harris’s words, Shaw “queer[s] the heterosexual family romance” (83) and departs from traditional psychoanalytic narratives of subject formation.

Shaw also departs from narratives of subject formation at the level of form. Autobiographical solo performance usually promotes the notion of a bounded subject with interiority. As Eric E. Peterson writes in “Narrative Identity in a Solo Performance...” “When ‘I tell you a story about something that happened to me,’ the [solo] performance is productive to the extent that an ‘I’ emerges in the act of telling a ‘you’ about a ‘me.’ As this description suggests, autobiographical narrative represents the performative accomplishment of an identity (‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘me’) as having already taken place” (231). The autobiographical solo performance form promotes the sense of an autonomous, knowable self. Shaw engages in this by using the “I” voice to relate a series of anecdotes to her audience—and some spectators leave the theater satisfied that they have heard Peggy Shaw’s life story.

But Shaw interrupts her own autobiographical narrative. Rather than a series of anecdotes arranged chronologically, Shaw’s anecdotes are sporadic and tangential, and Shaw frequently interrupts herself with musical numbers. One such instance of this occurs just after Shaw tells of her grandfather’s knockout punch: music begins to play and a microphone descends from the ceiling, as in a boxing match. Shaw performs an ironic rendition of “This is a Man’s World.” It is unclear where she might be located in the song’s lyrics, which are, “This is a man’s world, / This is a man’s world, / But it wouldn’t be nothin’, nothin’ / Without a woman or a girl” (*JLMF* 7:40-

8:00). As illustrated above, Shaw does not fit easily these categories. Since sex produces an expected gender performance, to classify Shaw as a man is to deny her female body; to classify Shaw as a woman, on the other hand, is to deny her masculinity. After Shaw delivers each line in an over-the-top quotation of James Brown's performance style, she checks in with the audience, shrugging her shoulders and raising her arms to communicate her skepticism about the lyrics. Shaw comments on the song by tacking on additional lyrics, singing, "Now lookie here: / Man, man can be anything he can, / But a woman make a better man... / The man, the man that ain't a woman, he's LOST in the wilderness" (*JLMF* 11:55-13:25). Shaw is a woman who makes a better man. Here, Shaw clearly separates her brand of masculinity from dominant masculinity.

Notably, Shaw's butch masculinity is based on protecting femininity. Shaw describes how her father's white shirt bulwarked her mother, saying, "She seemed fragile, like she'd break if it wasn't for my father's white shirt, keepin' the world from cavin' her in" (*JLMF* 39:40). Similarly, Shaw aspires to be supportive of the feminine via her butch masculinity. She explains, "That's why I chose to be a boy, so I could wear white starched shirts, and keep the ugly world away from girls. And so girls would hold my hand and rest their head on my shoulder..." (*YJLMF* 40:00-40:30). Here, Shaw's masculinity bolsters femininity. Rather than masculinity being figured in opposition or as superior to femininity, Shaw's masculinity upholds femininity.

In *You're Just Like My Father*, Shaw's performance of butchness is uninterested in passing. Rather, she maintains the tension between her sexed female body and her masculine gender. This tension is achieved through irony, through Shaw's simultaneous suggestion of masculinity and refusal of femininity. Importantly, Shaw's refusal of femininity is not anti-femme; rather, her masculinity is predicated on protecting the feminine.

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