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# "It's all the same to me": Gender-fluidity and Performativity in D. H. Lawrence's *The Fox*

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## Abstract

*In D. H. Lawrence's novella The Fox, the character March shows an ability to perform both masculine and feminine gender roles. While her performances are somewhat regulated by the other characters, March seems content with the gender-fluid nature of her identity. Her struggles with her identity come from Banford's and Henry's needs, which require her to become more masculine or more feminine rather than a balance of the two. While previous scholars have acknowledged March's interior binary, they have cited her gender expression as ultimately failed masculinity, citing Lawrence's own opinions on gender as proof. The scholarship on Lawrence cites his history and personal life as a reason for the supposedly strict gender dichotomy in his writing, but does not acknowledge Lawrence's own words in regards to gender-fluidity. Many scholars claim that March must give up a part of herself to fit the ending of the text. I disagree—on the contrary, March has not given up any part of her identity by the end of the story, and instead strives to maintain her autonomy in her new relationship with Henry. In this paper I argue that March performs both masculine and feminine gender roles, showing that she is not only a gender-fluid character, but also that she is able to adapt her performance when needed in order to maintain her autonomy. By understanding her character as fluid, The Fox portrays a new, undiscussed side of Lawrence's work, and raises questions about the gendered relationships between people.*

Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that "In this sense, *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (34). In D. H. Lawrence's novella *The Fox*, the character March shows an ability to perform multiple genders, both masculine and feminine. While her performances are regulated to a certain extent by the other characters, Banford and Henry, March seems content with the gender-fluid nature of her identity. Her struggles with her identity come from Banford's and Henry's needs, which require her to become either more masculine or more feminine rather than a balance of the two. While previous scholars have acknowledged March's interior binary, they have cited her gender expressions as ultimately failed masculinity. However, March has not given up any part of her identity by the end of the story, and instead strives to maintain her autonomy in her new relationship with Henry. March performs both masculine and feminine gender roles, showing that she is not only a gender-fluid character, but also that she is able to adapt her performance when needed in order to maintain her autonomy.

Much of the scholarship written on gender in *The Fox* adheres to a strict understanding of the gender binary, with little wiggle room for disagreement. Most scholars believe that March is a failed lesbian who must submit to Henry completely at the end of the story in order to fit back

into her feminine societal role. The scholarship condemns, and suggests that Lawrence condemns, March's more masculine performances throughout the text. R. P. Draper argues in "The Defeat of Feminism: D. H. Lawrence's 'The Fox' and 'the Woman Who Rode Away'" that March is falsely playing the part of a man in order to fill her supposed role as the man in her relationship with Banford, and implicates Lawrence's disapproval of the suffragettes in England as a historical context for his portrayal of their relationship. Draper also problematically equates feminism with lesbianism, writing, "Their feminist self-sufficiency excludes them from the main stream of life," which signifies the "weakness in the Lesbian ménage that the coming of *The Fox* exploits" (189). Jan Good's article "Towards a Resolution of Gender Identity Confusion: The Relationship of Henry and March in *The Fox*" also cites Lawrence's attitudes towards women and gender in her argument. Good states, "For Lawrence, the fully integrated female cannot still harbor masculine elements in her personality" (218). She argues that, in accordance with Lawrence's attitudes, March must submit to Henry at the end of the story in order to restore balance to the gender binary, but bases her claims on assumptions of what would occur after the end of the story. Marijane Osborn reaffirms this same notion in "Complexities of Gender and Genre in Lawrence's *The Fox*" through a discussion of the animal imagery in the text and its connection to the fable genre. Stanley Renner's article "Sexuality and the Unconscious: Psychosexual Drama and Conflict in 'The Fox'" connects to Osborn's animalistic portrayal of the characters with his discussion of human sexuality and what he describes as "the increasingly insistent prompting of nature for [March] to respond to the call of the great life force, the reproductive process" (250). He too discusses March's inevitable loss of autonomy to Henry.

The main issue with these scholars' arguments is the assumptions of Lawrence's intent and personal beliefs on gender. This is a common as-

sumption about his writing in general; in Kate Millett's commentary on *Lady Chatterly's Lover* in *Sexual Politics*, she writes that Lawrence's ideology longs for a "reversion to older sexual roles," and that "the world will only be put right when the male reassumes his mastery of the female in that total psychological and sensual domination which alone can offer her the 'fulfillment' of her nature" (242). Millett alludes to the conflict between male and female that is present in so many of Lawrence's texts. For example, in *Women in Love*, Lawrence illustrates the gender battle in many scenes, in particular the chapter "Water Party" where Dr. Brindall attempts to save Diana from drowning when she falls off the boat. Their bodies are found together the following morning, Diana clinging to Dr. Brindall to the point of choking him. Under the water, they raged a gender battle that ultimately cost them both their lives, because Diana appears not to have submitted to Dr. Brindall. While these dichotomies are definitely present in Lawrence's fiction, the writer also includes androgyny and nuance in his characters that are less discussed. Many scholars claim that Lawrence could not accept any kind of gender-fluidity within people or characters, yet they end up ignoring Lawrence's own writing on the ambiguity of the gender binary. Peggy Brayfield quotes Lawrence himself in "Lawrence's 'Male and Female Principles' and the Symbolism of 'The Fox,'":

"Every man comprises male and female in his being, the male always struggling for predominance. A woman likewise consists in male and female, with female predominant," wrote D. H. Lawrence in his 1914 "Study of Thomas Hardy." The balance of whole individual, he implies in this essay, would recognize and respect in himself the claims of both sets of characteristics. (Brayfield 41)

Brayfield proves with this quote from Lawrence

that the author clearly recognized the capacity for individuals to possess both masculine and feminine characteristics. Butler would agree; she claims that "there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two," and explains, "Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (10). While Lawrence here does suggest a "predominance" of one side of the binary over another, he still acknowledges the existence of both, which contradicts what much of the scholarship has claimed about him and his writings. Brayfield, in fact, contradicts the rest of the work on *The Fox* by acknowledging the blending of gender performances and identities in Lawrence's writing, and portrays Lawrence's opinions differently from other articles. Some scholars have tried to qualify their arguments; Draper writes that men and women "are complex beings in whom both active and passive principles exist and need to exist. To simplify them into wholly masculine males and wholly feminine females in accordance with Lawrentian theory would be to destroy them as living human beings" (193). Draper, while seeming to acknowledge the need to recognize both genders within someone, still cites "Lawrentian theory" as not doing the same, which contradicts Lawrence's own writing.

*The Fox*, according to Osborn, "[with] all its complexities, both literary and autobiographical ... is at base a powerful fable about threatened identity" (94). The plot is relatively simple - Banford and March live together on a farm, and one day a young man named Henry comes and decides he wants the land. In order to get it and assert his male dominance, he decides to marry March and oust Banford from the property in whatever way he is able. He is cunning, like *The Fox* he is compared to, and eventually wins the struggle by "accidentally" killing Banford and getting March to agree to marriage. The character's identity that is most-struggled over in the story is March's, for

both Banford and Henry have expectations of her and the roles she performs with each of them. With Banford she performs more of the masculine roles and tasks, but still maintains some gender-fluidity and autonomy overall, while Henry wants her to obey him and perform only the feminine duties of a wife, despite his initial attraction to her more traditionally masculine features. Brayfield cites March's relationship with Henry as the central point of the story, stating, "this tale has at its thematic center the struggle of 'male' and 'female' qualities in the psyche of Ellen March, and the conflict she feels when her lover refuses to acknowledge the special being she is, insisting she become that ordinary abstraction, 'just his woman'" (42). Henry, in order to fully accept and exert his responsibility towards March, and by extension the property, must strip March of the masculine side of her personal gender binary.

While Henry's goal is to make March only perform her feminine side, that does not mean that the text overall suggests March must do the same, or that she is "just his woman" to begin with. Throughout *The Fox*, March is depicted as strongly exhibiting both masculine and feminine qualities, which she seems to feel comfortable performing either interchangeably or simultaneously. The opening line of the text is, "The two girls were usually know by their sur-names, Banford and March" (Lawrence 7). From the first sentence, Lawrence sets up the women in a more masculine position by referring to them by their last names only, which would traditionally be how one refers to a man. The women call one another by their first names sporadically throughout the text, but the narration solely refers to them as Banford and March. Even Henry refers to them by their last names throughout the story, signifying that they are in positions of power, despite his feelings of superiority and plan to overtake them. The women, and March in particular, being referred to by their last names begins the binary discussion of the story, and sets up further descriptions of March with masculine and feminine qualities.

March's physical descriptions and the work she does around the farm are gendered to be either stereotypically masculine or feminine according to societal expectations. While March is "more robust" and has "learned carpentry and joinering" (Lawrence 7), she also "[takes] up a roll of crochet-work," (Lawrence 13) and is "busy in the kitchen preparing another meal" (Lawrence 15). March uses her hands to maintain the property and the home. She also outwardly dresses in both male and female clothes at different times during the text. "When she was out and about," Lawrence writes, "in her puttees and breeches, her belted coat and her loose cap, she looked almost like some graceful, loose-balanced young man, for her shoulders were always straight, and her movements easy and confident, even tinged with a little indifference, or irony" (8). When she is performing more manual chores, she wears a land-girl's uniform. However, later on in the text when Henry comes inside for tea, he sees March dressed in a traditionally feminine dress: "And to his amazement March was dressed in a dress of dull, green silk crape ... Her dress was a perfectly simple bluey-green crape, with a line of gold stitching round the top and round the sleeves, which came to the elbow. It was cut just plain, and round at the top, and showed her white soft throat" (Lawrence 48). Each of these descriptions shows how March is able to change her performance and dress based on what is necessary in the given situation. When Henry questions her nice dress, she calmly replies, "What else do you expect me to wear, but a dress?" since that is what is appropriate for teatime. Renner writes, "[March] dresses for the occasion and not propriety. Her masculine clothes imply not so much a masculinity struggling to emerge as a refreshing independence from stultifying conceptions of what a woman is and can do" (249). Renner calls March a "New Woman" for her time, and explain that she has "established her way of life with the same kind of autonomy that men have always enjoyed in determined independence from the patterns that have

traditionally defined a woman's role" (249). By maintaining the land, the home, and her relationship with Banford, March displays Renner's "independence" from traditional patterns and asserts her dual gender expression.

Along with March's external performance is the description of her internal gender-fluidity. Butler explains that "the gendered stylization of the body ... show[s] that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts" (xv). March is described often with the word "queer," and her mind is frequently divided in thought, showing her internal duality. Lawrence portrays March's interiority through her observation of the property:

The trees on the wood-edge were a darkish, brownish green in the full light - for it was the end of August. Beyond, the naked, copper-like shafts and limbs of the pine-trees shone in the air. Nearer, the rough grass, with its long brownish stalks a gleam, was full of light. The fowls were round about - the ducks were still swimming on the pond under the pine trees. March looked at it all, saw it all, and did not see it. (Lawrence 10)

The imagery in this passage uses clear masculine and feminine language to describe the natural surroundings, from the "naked, copper-like shafts" of the trees to the images of the fowls. March both sees and does not see these details, signifying her acknowledgement of the binary but also her nonconformity to it. *The Fox* appears in this scene, and captures March's attention deep into her consciousness. Lawrence writes, "But whenever she fell into her off half-muses, when she was half-rapt, and half intelligently aware of what passed under her vision, then it was *The Fox* which somehow dominated her unconsciousness, possessed the blank half of her musing" (12). The repeated use of the word "half" reinforces her capacity to portray both masculine and feminine quali-

ties. While *The Fox* is related closely to Henry in physical description, it is also importantly attached to March. Brayfield explains that the animal is "curious, intelligent, adventurous, independent, free," which she cites as more masculine qualities, and yet is also "a physically beautiful, instinctive creature, associated with darkly mysterious animal (physical) life," which associates it with the feminine as well (45). Brayfield explains,

It is to Lawrence's credit as an artist that he integrates *The Fox* symbolism into the realistic surface of his story by showing the animal's symbolic qualities to exist first in the mind of March. "A creature of odd whims and unsatisfied tendencies," she has tried to fulfill them by being "an independent woman with a man's responsibility" - or by allowing the Male Principle to dominate her. But her life with Jill Bandord on the chicken farm has not brought fulfillment, either of the cravings of the "male" component of the human psyche for adventure, freedom, and exploration, or of those of the "female" component for development of the feelings, submission to instincts, passion. (45)

*The Fox*, for March, shows a balance in gender duality, which is what she craves the most. While she has some autonomy and fluidity in her relationship with Banford, she is still being pulled more so towards the masculine performance. This imbalance may then be a factor in her slowly growing attraction towards Henry, who appears to be physically like the creature. Henry's arrival brings out more of a balance in March's performance, providing her with the equal gender presentation that the text suggests she requires.

While at first Henry appears to provide March with more of a gendered balance, he soon demands too much femininity from her, and expects her to let go of her masculine side and submit to him as only a feminized wife. On the sur-

face, March seems to change her performance for the partner whom she is with or more drawn to in the moment in order to please her/him. However, further examination shows that she changes her performance in order to subvert the expected and maintain whatever autonomy she is able to keep. March's more overt performances occur once Henry has killed *The Fox*, succeeding where she could not. Osborn writes, "Curiously, [March's] change seems to have even more to do with Henry's shooting of *The Fox* than with his proposal of marriage... March has restructured her identity in response to the role that Henry's male-animal presence makes available" (87-88). While Osborn claims that March begins to submit to Henry because of the proposal and the killing of *The Fox*, Brayfield pushes the argument further by stating that March never truly accepted the proposal in the first place. She writes that March's response "is merely a submission of her will under pressure, not a free choice," and explains, "March is never quite satisfied with the decision, which requires a denial of the 'male' component of her psyche" (Brayfield 47). This point becomes evident when she writes to Henry to break off the engagement and in the symbolism of her second dream after Henry kills *The Fox* (Brayfield 47). By killing *The Fox*, Henry hopes metaphorically to kill March's genderfluidity so she will willingly submit to his dominance.

The ending interior monologue from March in the last few pages of the story reaffirms her determination not to give up on her own fluid identity: "She *would* keep awake. She *would* know. She *would* consider and judge and decide. She *would* have the reins of her own life between her own hands. She *would* be an independent woman to the last" (Lawrence 70). March recognizes the threat to her identity in her new union with Henry. Osborn writes, "Lawrence's story concerns the desperate dangers of human relationships that cast one into first one role then another, roles that may present a danger to those who do not keep their eyes open and thereby keep a firm hold on their

essential selves” (94). Keeping hold of her essential self is March’s biggest struggle throughout the text. Though most of the chores are traditionally masculine, March takes care of Banford in a fluid sense by working on the land and performing domestic assistance with meals, serving tea, and taking care of Banford’s health. Though she is able to find a form of balance, March admits to herself at the end that she does at the cost of her own personal happiness, and that she is glad Banford is dead (Lawrence 68). March next thinks,

And women? — what goal can any woman conceive, except happiness? Just happiness for herself and the whole world. That, and nothing else. And so, she assumes the responsibility and sets off towards her goal. She can see it there, at the foot of the rainbow. Or she can see it a little way beyond, in the blue distance. Not far, not far. (Lawrence 69)

March is now able to see a way to achieve her own personal happiness as a gender-fluid individual, which to a certain extent is due to Henry. Henry comes and sets March free from Banford, which is why March expresses relief and gratitude that she is dead. March’s next task then is to maintain her newfound freedom and not submit to his will, which the ending suggests she may do: “And her eyelids drooped with the slow motion, sleep weighing them unconscious. But she pulled them open again” (Lawrence 71). March refuses to fall asleep in Henry’s arms as they stare across the sea to Canada and to her new life as his wife. Her resistance is important to note, and has been overlooked by others writing about the text. There seems to be an assumption that she will eventually succumb to Henry’s dominance, though nothing about the ending of the story suggests that she will, and in fact appears to assert the opposite. Claiming that March will relinquish her masculinity does not acknowledge her dual gender performances throughout the text. Lawrence writes in his “Study of Thomas

Hardy,” “The final aim of every living thing, creature, or being is the full achievement of itself. This accomplished, it will produce what it will produce, it will bear the fruit of its nature ... Not the work I shall produce, but the real Me I shall achieve, that is the consideration; of the complete Me will come the complete fruit of me ...” (403). The ambiguity of *The Fox’s* ending signifies the possibility of March completely becoming herself, which is evident in Lawrence’s portrayal of her character.

Boxing the discourse of Lawrence and *The Fox* into one set of expectations and outcomes is problematic because it does not allow for a truer, more complex reading of the characters and dynamics between them. To acknowledge March as more than just a failed man is to acknowledge a fuller discourse about her and the story in its own context, and in the larger contexts of Lawrence’s fiction and modern literature. Most of the scholarship on this novella so far has tried to discuss March in the same binary of men versus women as in Lawrence’s other texts, but because March embodies both gender performances, the limited reading has not allowed for any new discourse on her or the piece overall. This type of “man vs. woman” and “man trying to dominate woman” dialogue excludes other readings. Thus, the scholarship has reached an impasse, which raises the question, so what? Where does the discussion go from here? These readings do not acknowledge Lawrence’s own struggles with gender, despite claiming to pull from his own personal beliefs. Lawrence sought deep homo-social relationships with other men, and acknowledged masculine and feminine characteristics within people, as Brayfield cites. Perhaps what this suggests is a necessity for a new reading of Lawrence that does not select certain opinions in order to fit him or his writings into preconceived gender roles. It is because of March’s masculine side that Lawrence has created which allows her to maintain some kind of autonomy at the end of the story, and to assume that she will ultimately fail strips

her of purposeful characteristics on Lawrence's part. Not to acknowledge March's varied gender performances is to read *The Fox* without a full understanding of her character, or of Lawrence's commentary on gender roles through her thoughts and actions.

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