“WET, DIRTY WOMEN” AND “MEN WITHOUT PANTS”: THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AT THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Mention the words “Renaissance festival” to your average American adult, and you’ll likely conjure up images of knights jousting on horseback, casually-dressed visitors gnawing on turkey legs, barely-restrained cleavage in tight bodices, comic variety performers on earthy wooden stages, and richly-dressed royals presiding over it all. More than diversionary entertainment, however, the American Renaissance festival provides visitors with a complex space in which elements of carnival create opportunities for identity and, most important for this thesis, gender play. Using a multidisciplinary approach that features Judith Butler’s notion of performed gender as its foundation, I examine the performances of three specific groups—the Queen and knight, the bagpipe and drum group Tartanic, and the Washing Well Wenches—in order to explore the complex gender messages each communicates both to and with their audiences. The Queen’s royal privilege and “proper” performance of femininity affect each of the subsequent performances examined, either directly or tacitly sanctioning both the masculine performances of the knights and Tartanic as well as the (un)feminine performance of the Wenches. While each of the groups tend to favor a particular gender performance (either “proper” or “improper”), each also includes moments that allow for just the opposite, from the presence of a female knight at the Joust to a male-on-male lap dance by Tartanic to the bolstering of male egos through sexual objectification at the Wash Pit. In the end, this thesis claims that it is perhaps true that Renaissance festivals don’t really change the world, but it seems that they may, in fact, release visitors from it in a way that allows them to examine—and play with—the ways in which “sedimented” notions of gender are constructed through performance.
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I was watching the Tony Awards just a few nights ago, and noticed the semi-panic that seems to set in when individuals come to the microphone to accept their award and begin thanking those who have helped them earn their accolades. Even in those with little crinkled lists of whom they must recognize—anxiously wrung and re-wrung over hours, perhaps days—the anxiety of forgetting someone percolates just behind their eyes.

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Mention the words “Renaissance festival” to your average American adult, and you’ll likely conjure up images of knights jousting on horseback, casually-dressed visitors gnawing on turkey legs, barely-restrained cleavage in tight bodices, comic variety performers on earthy wooden stages, and richly-dressed royals presiding over it all. Indeed, American Renaissance festivals provide visitors with a delightful array of experiences and entertainments, but these events must not be mistaken for merely diversionary amusement. Despite the fact that Renaissance festivals have not been the focus of any scholarly books to date (the first, Tony Korol-Evans’ *Renaissance Festivals: Merrying the Past and Present*, is due in August of 2009), these festivals are chock-full of fascinating subjects of inquiry. From social phenomenon to performance technique, marketing practice to environmental study, the complex world of the American Renaissance festival offers countless avenues for potential study.

For the purposes of this thesis, my interest is centered on gender and performance. Viewing the Renaissance festival as an “other” space, I explore answers to the following questions: What happens with gender in this space? Are received gender norms subverted, reinscribed, or reinvented (or a combination thereof)? Who is performing and who is performed for? Is there a gendered viewpoint that dominates the festival overall?

*Organization of the Thesis*

This Introduction lays out the main issues I address in this thesis and provides a brief introduction to and history of American Renaissance festivals. In ensuing sections, I situate this thesis within existing scholarship, detail the methodology I used to gather data for the study, and
articulate the theoretical concepts that underlie the work. The following three chapters are case studies, each chapter featuring the performance(s) of a particular group. Chapter 1 presents the iconic Renaissance festival figures of the Queen and the knight, examining the Joust (the only performance in which the knights are present) as well as the Queen’s other performances. Chapter 2 features Tartanic, an all-male (bag)pipe and drum group whose members rely heavily on their beskirted (i.e., in kilts) and shirtless masculinity for entertainment. Chapter 3 details the work of the Washing Well Wenches, a female duo whose humorous act relies on turning the sexual tables on men. Each of these three case-study chapters includes a detailed account of the performance(s) I observed, followed by an unpacking of the ways in which key moments of these events comment upon gender, including applicable theoretical concerns. The final chapter of this thesis, the Conclusion, briefly reiterates important concepts and pulls together the variety of gender messages detailed in the preceding chapters.

What is a Renaissance Festival?

Whether they have attended one or not, most Americans are probably familiar with the basic aim and content of the modern Renaissance festival (or faire; the terms are used interchangeably in the festival world and in this thesis). In the fall of 2008, for example, FreeCreditReport.com, known for their tongue-in cheek television advertisements, produced and ran a television commercial that featured its regular cast bemoaning their credit woes at a Renaissance faire (because, as we all know, credit scores don’t matter there). And “Worst Renaissance Fair,” the October 6, 2008 episode of the primetime CBS sitcom Big Bang Theory, presented its four central characters returning from attendance at their area Renaissance festival, in full period costume. Both the comedic scene that results from this situation and the humor
contained in the FreeCreditReport.com commercial clearly rely on Renaissance festivals as easily recognizable events in American culture.

In general, Renaissance festivals endeavor to recreate a past time period that is basically “Medieval” or “Renaissance” in character by constructing a fantasy village—some even comprised of permanent structures—that includes merchants selling period wares, casts of villagers speaking in Shakespearean-sounding dialects, and even visitors clad in period costume. While most Renaissance festivals foreground the idea of offering of an “authentic” Medieval experience in order to attract visitors, strict historical accuracy is actually seldom required of anyone or anything at these events. Even the most “historically accurate” performers can be seen drinking a very modern Pepsi, a merchant shop selling hand-crafted swords can stand next to one hawking festival hoodies, and visitors regularly combine varying levels of contemporary and period dress, such as a belted kilt and black concert T-shirt, or jeans with a logo T-shirt and fairy wings. Rather than offering an accurate historical re-creation then, Renaissance faires may more accurately be thought of as constructing something more like an imaginary world that references a particular time period.

Some festivals include years as early as the 400s in their historical vista, but the general preference among U.S. festivals, according to data maintained by Renaissance Magazine, is to place their event roughly between 1300 and 1700 AD, and almost always in England (renaissancemagazine.com). The buildings, clothing, entertainments, merchandise, music, and language are all designed to correspond to this time period, and visitors spend the day shopping, eating, and attending performances across the grounds. These performances, which are included in the cost of admission and do not require additional payment or ticketing, occur most often in areas set aside as open-air theatres, but can also take place elsewhere on the grounds, with both
scripted and impromptu moments cropping up throughout the festival, some even including visitors in their action.

Renaissance festivals are often located in rural areas, just outside a major city or metropolitan area, with changes in environment and landscape helping transport visitors from the “real,” synthetic world to the “other,” natural world of the festival. Civilization is kept at bay as much as possible on the faire grounds as well, where stages and shops nestle among thick trees, green grass, and brown earth. While some festivals feature paved walkways, others choose to offer dirt paths, sometimes strewn with wood chips or gravel (especially if the grounds become muddy), and evidence of the use of electricity is carefully hidden from spectators’ view (although it is indeed used by concessionaires and merchants).

Fig. 1: A section of the grounds at the Michigan Renaissance Festival

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1 All photographs in this document are taken by the author, unless otherwise indicated.
The grounds of many larger festivals also feature permanent structures that look and feel as if they belong to that festival’s proclaimed time period: small merchant shops are constructed primarily of wood, brick, and cement or stucco and stages are wooden, accompanied by long rows of likewise wooden benches for seating. Other small but atmospheric touches are often added to the grounds: wooden bridges, wooden signposts with directive signs, stone or wooden benches under trees, fountains, statues, etc.

While the physical structures of the festival contribute a great deal to the creation of the Renaissance illusion, the costumes and actions of festival staff and merchants add yet another layer of fantasy to the experience. All festival merchants and actors engage in their work in period dress, and these individuals generally have the most “authentic” clothing, hair, accessories, etc. Many actors and occasional vendors engage in a type of Shakespearean-sounding Renaissance-speak devised to play as “authentic” to visitors. It is a lingo sometimes spoken with a British accent that generally includes a great deal of “thous,” “thees,” “m’ladys,” “didsts,” and vocally stressed “ed” endings (for example, in words such as banished [“bannih-shed”] and perused [“per-ooh-zed”]): “Good day, m’lady. Didst thou know the Queen’s parade arrived (‘arrive-ed’) early today?”

Merchants’ goods are generally “period” as well: they offer hand-crafted jewelry, candles, swords, Renaissance clothing and armor, leather goods, pewter, wood crafts, fairy paraphernalia, and much more. Even food vendors try to align the festival cuisine with period expectations: the popular soup in a bread bowl and turkey legs have become iconic symbols of the faire, and, with a simple name change to the “Barbarian Burger,” a modern bacon cheeseburger gains period cachet.
Roaming the grounds along with festival actors, patrons in dress—the most dedicated of which are sometimes called “playtrons” by serious festival-goers—also further the period feeling of the faire, perhaps more than anything else on the grounds. They usually outnumber festival staff and merchants, thereby ensuring that the entirety of the festival grounds is populated by those actively engaged in the “medievalism” of the event. While the majority of performers and playtrons choose to wear clothing that is generally Medieval/Renaissance in style, there is great variety in how that style is expressed. The performers and some individuals dress from head to toe in pieces that are (or seem) historically accurate, while other visitors wear a hybridized form of modern and medieval dress. Still others push beyond the boundaries of typical Renaissance dress to other worlds and time periods: fairies materialize, pirates abound, Vikings make regular appearances, and even the Grim Reaper occasionally makes a visit.

Dress is also one of the areas that provides intriguing material for examining gender display, with men in kilts and tight velvet pants as well as loose breeches and armor, and women in voluminous skirts and leather bustiers as well as loose-fitting cotton pants and high-necked blouses. Gender presentation also comes into play at the merchants’ shops, where jewelry and hair ornaments are as commonly purchased by men as by women, and female pirates test out swords and daggers right next to male ones. While dress and adornment are a ripe area for gender study, however, they are not the focus of this work; most important for this study are the ways in which the events and performances conceived and presented by the festivals and their casts reflect gender expectations and behavior.
The History of the American Renaissance Festival

Since their inception in the early 1960s, Renaissance festivals have continued to gain popularity across the U.S., now occurring in nearly every state in the country and occurring over time periods as short as one day to as long as several months (renaissancemagazine.com). Today there are over 200 festivals in the U.S., spread among 43 of the 50 states, with the largest number being held in California (renaissancemagazine.com). Festivals operate only on weekends and holidays during daylight hours, and one can be found in operation all year-round; in fact, today not a month goes by without a Renaissance festival occurring somewhere in the United States. Attendance at U.S. festivals ranges from small gatherings of 100 visitors (at a one-day event) to huge crowds of 373,000 visitors (over the course of eight weekends) at a single festival (renaissancemagazine.com).

While one might expect that such massive popularity could only have been achieved through insinuation into popular culture over the course of a century (like, for example, amusement parks), this proliferation of festivals belies the short history of Renaissance faires in the U.S. The roots of Renaissance festivals lie in the resurgence of interest in medieval and Renaissance culture in America that occurred after World War II and the resulting early music revival of the 1950s that produced folk musician and traditionalist John Langstaff. In 1957, Langstaff held “A Christmas Masque of Traditional Revels” in New York City, and repeated the event the following year in Washington, DC. A televised version was broadcast on the “Hallmark Hall of Fame” in 1966—which included Dustin Hoffman playing the part of the dragon slain by Saint George—and in 1971 Langstaff established a permanent Christmas Revels in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Pontiff).
While Langstaff was planting his Renaissance festival seeds on the East Coast, teachers Ronald and Phyllis Patterson originated the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in California in 1963, as an outgrowth of a school project. The first Faire was held in North Hollywood as a fundraiser for radio station KPFK and drew some 8,000 people for the one-weekend event. The Patterson family’s company, Theme Events Limited, and its non-profit affiliate, The Living History Center, are generally credited with developing the Renaissance faire concept as it exists today (Gunnels, Korol, Pontiff).

While many of the festivals in the U.S. are independently owned and operated, the contemporary trend in entertainment—that of large parent companies operating several events—has not left the Renaissance faire world untouched. Today the Renaissance Pleasure Faire is associated with Renaissance Entertainment Productions, a company that operates two other faires (in Wisconsin/Illinois and New York). The popularity (and profitability) of Renaissance faires, or “Renfaires” as they are often called, is also evidenced by the presence of dedicated websites (renaissancefestival.com, renfaire.com, and renfest.com, to name a few) and even a magazine: Renaissance Magazine. Both a print and online publication, the magazine “features articles on history, castles, heraldry, culinary and herbal arts, and in-depth interviews with the movers and shakers of the re-enactment and faire communities” (renaissancemagazine.com). It also includes “[r]egular columns [that offer] review[s of] period books, movies, music, web sites, and games” (renaissancemagazine.com).

Contribution to Existing Scholarship

The discourse that results from this study has the potential to contribute to a variety of scholarly fields. Because of its interdisciplinary approach, I imagine this thesis might be of interest to students and scholars in Popular Culture, Women’s and Gender Studies, Men’s
Studies, Performance Studies, American Studies and Cultural Studies, just to name a few. In addition, this study contributes to the small research area in theatre and performance studies that focuses on Renaissance Festivals. While existing scholarship on public ritual, fairs and festivals, pageantry and spectacles in the scholarly disciplines mentioned above is extensive, scholarship on Renaissance festivals (or “Renfests”) consists of only a handful of dissertations and theses, with several dating back to the 1980s.

The earliest Renfaire studies, published in 1986, are Master’s theses by Brenda Renee Pontiff and Delanna Kay Reed. Pontiff’s *The American Renaissance Festival* (Kansas State University) is an essentially quantitative survey of U.S. Renaissance festivals in operation at the time of her research, providing information on where festivals are located, what they offer, and how they are administratively structured. She also stresses the “educational” value of Renfests, (which I find problematic in light of the absence—and occasional eschewing—of historical accuracy that prevails among festivals). Despite this historiographic concern and the wholly descriptive nature of her thesis, Reed’s manuscript is valuable as an orientation to those unfamiliar with these festivals.

Delanna Kay Reed’s *Readers Theatre in Performance: The Analysis and Compilation of Period Literature for a Modern Renaissance Faire* (North Texas State University) includes a Renaissance festival as its main site of analysis, but its focus is more on Reader’s Theatre than on the faire. For her study, Reed worked with actors from Scarborough Faire, the sister faire to the Texas Renaissance Festival, to create and perform a street theatre piece based on historical sources. The piece was developed during the regular multi-weekend pre-festival workshop (training period) for the faire and was performed each weekend for a single Faire season. Reed’s study details the process of selecting source material for the script, the development of the script
(a copy of the script is included in the study), issues with rehearsal and performance, and the ultimate results of the project. Although Reed’s aim for the project was to prove the viability of a “script compiled of literature from the oral tradition of England” (ii) for twentieth-century audiences and performers, her work serves the additional purpose of providing a valuable glimpse into the somewhat unique rehearsal and performance process of Renfaires from an insider’s point of view.

Over ten years pass before the appearance of another thesis on the subject of Renaissance festivals, Jennifer Sue Moore’s *A Descriptive Study of the Michigan Renaissance Festival* (Michigan State University). Like Reed, Moore has insider status, but Moore’s was achieved over eleven years rather than the single season of Reed’s residency. Moore’s thesis also appears to echo Pontiff’s work as a descriptive text, but Moore in fact offers brief but insightful analyses throughout her manuscript; for example, in the introduction alone Moore examines the American search for cultural myth as a factor in faire popularity and foregrounds the notion of carnival. The influence of performance theory is also evident in Moore’s work, as she claims the entirety of the festival grounds as a stage. The descriptive elements of Moore’s work can perhaps be considered as a reiteration and expansion of Pontiff’s work, offering a more in-depth look at one particular festival rather than aggregate information from several festivals. Moore delves into such subjects as historical accuracy and authenticity, costuming and construction conventions, forms and places of entertainment, administrative structure, performance, and a good deal more. She provides specific details and examples that offer additional insight and detail and keep the manuscript lively and engaging.

Renaissance faire studies fell silent again until 2004, when two dissertations appeared: Hyounggon Kim’s *Serious Leisure, Participation and Experience in Tourism: Authenticity and*
Ritual in a Renaissance Festival (Texas A&M University), and Jennifer Sue Gunnels’ (who had defended her thesis under the name Jennifer Sue Moore, see above) Let the Car Burn, We’re Going to the Faire: History, Performance, Community and Identity within the Renaissance Festival (University of Texas at Austin). Kim’s work focuses on an examination of serious visitors to the Texas Renaissance Festival in light of the concept of “serious leisure” as defined by Dr. Robert Stebbins, professor of Sociology at the University of Calgary and author of over thirty books in the social sciences. Through in-depth interviews with over thirty serious faire visitors, Kim examines their experiences in relation to six characteristics of serious leisure, addressing such issues as alienation, self-image, communitas, ritual, and much more. Kim considers these serious visitors a unique subculture, and examines the dual nature of their presence on the grounds—both as consumers and producers of culture—and the motivations for their high level of commitment to attending the festival. Kim’s theoretical grounding is noteworthy; in addition to numerous other scholars from the social sciences and psychology, he uses Turner extensively throughout, along with van Gennep, MacCannell, and Goffman.

While Jennifer Sue Gunnels’ dissertation differs from Kim’s in that it was driven by the study of theatre history and performance studies rather than social sciences or tourism studies, many of the same concepts are explored in her work. Gunnels’ multilayered and sophisticated text considers issues of tourism and audience expectation and alienation, but her focus is primarily on community and self-image. Gunnels explores, discusses, and defines community to demonstrate the ways in which Renaissance festivals create it, and her examination of self-image centers on the creation of new individual and group identities through identity play. In fact, the main argument of her dissertation is essentially that Renfests provide “a place of both safety and permission in exploring community and identity” (9). Gunnels offers three case studies to
demonstrate the methods by which different festivals accomplish this, using Texas’ Scarborough Faire, The Texas Renaissance Festival, and her home faire, the Michigan Renaissance Festival, to demonstrate how the creation of community and identity is achieved through interaction between actors and guests, historical commodification and commerce, and history and myth, respectively.

Gunnels prepares the reader for these case studies with an extensive introduction that provides a thorough history of Renaissance festivals and an exploration of their roots, including the use of Umberto Eco’s work to explore the modern fascination with the Middle Ages. Additionally, Gunnels takes up and expands on information included in her thesis, providing a much more thorough and insightful explanation of what Renaissance festivals are and what happens at them. She also uses her Introduction to lay out basic concepts that are crucial for understanding the thrust of her work: she carefully distinguishes the meanings of history and heritage, differentiating Renaissance festivals from living history sites; she uses semiotics to set up a relationship between community-building and the interpretation of symbols; and she tackles issues of authenticity. The introductory chapter of Gunnels’ work also frontloads the useful concepts of restored behavior (via Richard Schechner) and frontstage/backstage (via Irving Goffman), and sets out the importance of play and myth in the festival’s creation of a space in which community and identity can be experimented with, created, and ultimately discarded or retained.

Gunnels is one of the few scholars engaged in Renaissance faire studies who addresses gender in her work, although she does so only briefly. In her dissertation, Gunnels points out that more traditional historic sites face limitations in terms of race and gender because they work to adhere to strict historical criteria. In other words, these sites are limited to offering women and
non-whites only the roles available to them during their chosen historical time period—roles that tend toward the domestic, enslaved, and oppressed. Renaissance faires, Gunnels argues, offer more opportunity for identity creation because they do not adhere to strict historical standards and provide a mythological and therefore open-ended scenario in which individuals can create themselves.

Gunnels makes brief mention of other gendered behaviors in her work, including the sale of shields made with emblems that appeal to little girls; the reportedly “blind casting policy” of the Michigan Renaissance Festival, which “ignores race and gender” (227); and the “historically authentic” choice a woman can make at the festival to be a “sassy wench” without being subject to the social stigma that would have been attached or the dangers that would have accompanied such status during the Renaissance. A few other minor mentions are made regarding the clothing available for purchase by men and women and the power that accompanies the wearing of a sword, regardless of the wearer’s gender.

Finally, Kimberly Tony Korol’s 2006 dissertation, *Modern Carnival: Performer and Patron Interaction and Immersion at the Maryland Renaissance Festival* (Northwestern University), has the distinction of being the only manuscript examined here that is slated for publication (forthcoming from McFarland Press). Korol’s insightful text uses the Maryland Renaissance Festival (MDRF) as a case study through which she examines “such concepts as the sensescape, intrasticial immersion, historical elaboration, and the co-performer/witness” (202). Korol’s work also provides current (and until this point absent) information on the state of Renfaire scholarship in the twenty-first century, an even more detailed and expansive history of Renaissance festivals, and another insider’s detailed perspective on the events—both large and small—that occur at the festival.
While these contributions to the field are noteworthy, Korol’s most unique contribution to the discourse is likely her introduction of the “intrastice,” a concept which takes as its starting point Turner’s notion of liminality but departs from it, specifically in terms of the neither/nor subject position that characterizes his view. Instead, Korol posits a state of both/and; of being both here and there, rather than neither her nor there. In terms of the Renaissance festival, intrasticiancy is “the state created by the overlapping of the actuality of twenty-first century America and the historical record of sixteenth-century England” (2). She proposes three levels of intrasticiancy and uses the bulk of her work to examine factors she suggests heavily influence the achievement (or not) of these intrasticiant states.

One of the factors examined in terms of achieving immersion is the sensescape, or total environment of the Renaissance festival—all of the sights and sounds as well as the smells, tastes, and touches. Korol provides numerous examples of the MDRF’s sensescape by taking the reader on a descriptive tour of the grounds, detailing the various sensory experiences encountered in each area and revealing the ways in which each of those encounters can contribute to a greater level of intrasticiancy for the visitors and performers.

Korol’s discourse is heavily influenced by Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, which she uses effectively to support her work but also is careful to disagree with when she finds the theory ignores important issues. Korol is especially critical of Bakhtin’s utopian view of carnival, which ignores the seedier and less desirable results of the inversion of social order. Nonetheless, the concept of carnival contains a great deal that Korol finds useful, and she adroitly threads it throughout the entire work. Her section on the MDRF’s choice to remain open on the weekend following September 11, 2001 is especially fascinating in the way it addresses carnival’s potential for healing.
Another key concept at play in Korol’s work is Goffman’s frame analysis, which Korol uses to discuss the expectations individuals bring to faire interactions. These frames, posits Korol, greatly influence the level of intrasticiancy attained and can change (be “re-keyed”) numerous times throughout a day at the faire or even within a particular moment. Overall, Korol’s work is rich in theoretical foundations and descriptive anecdotes, and includes a history that is unmatched in current Renfaire scholarship.

Korol, like Gunnels, addresses gender in her study, and does so more thoroughly. Throughout the text, Korol’s descriptive storytelling is careful to distinguish gendered behavior, such as when she details the instruction cast members provide to visitors on the proper way to show reverence to royalty (bows for men, curtsies for women). She is explicit about how carnival can play out in gendered behavior, relating stories of stealth “kilt inspectors” and “bodice diving” activities, and observing that “[w]ench costumes, which are not historically accurate, are plentiful at the festival, and the display of the female bosom is nearly unavoidable” (179).

Finally, Korol discusses carnival’s emphasis on the grotesque and the “lower bodily stratum” (39), which includes, in the intrasticial world, women’s breasts (Korol). The continued celebration by Renaissance faires of these areas of the body—for example, in the wearing of codpieces, the popularity of penis jokes, the proliferation of exposed bosoms, and the near omnipresence of ribald humor—not only offers evidence to support the carnivalesque nature of the event, but provides additional material for consideration when examining gendered behavior at the faire.

Because only two of the aforementioned works (Gunnels’ and Korol’s)—which essentially comprise the whole of current Renfaire scholarship—address gender, and do so only
briefly, my work on the performance of gender at Renaissance faires will open up a new line of discourse in the study of this cultural phenomenon, addressing an area which has thus far been relatively unexplored. In addition, because of this study’s theoretical grounding in both gender studies and performance studies (as well as the other areas previously mentioned), it contributes to these already robust areas of scholarship by applying existing concepts to a heretofore uninvestigated subject of study in these fields.

Methodology and Theoretical Foundations

This study is based on data gathered at two Midwestern Renaissance festivals—the Michigan Renaissance Festival in Holly, Michigan and the Ohio Renaissance Festival in Harveysburg, Ohio—as well as aggregate anecdotal information from numerous years of attending (as a visitor rather than a scholar) the Pennsylvania and Greater Pittsburgh Renaissance Festivals. During the months of August, September, and October, 2008, I attended the Michigan and Ohio Festivals, observing a variety of staged performances and noting the ways in which those performances commented on and constituted gender. The performers studied were all adults age 18 and over and performances were selected by title, show description (where available), and recommendation (from both festival staff and other visitors), with several events receiving more than one viewing. While attending each performance, I kept track of my thoughts and observations in field notes, securing photographic and video evidence of select performances to support these notes. After the festivals closed, I communicated with representatives of each of the festivals as well as one of the performance groups featured in this thesis (Tartanic) in order to

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2 I use the term “staged” here to clearly differentiate the performances I observed from other types of performance that occur on the festival grounds. Those that I observed were at least partially scripted, conducted at scheduled times, and occurred on established stages. Impromptu or improvised interactions occurring at nonspecific locations on the grounds do not constitute a significant portion of my research.
confirm and clarify details and gain background information. (I attempted communication with several of the other performers, but I was unable to establish contact.)

Although I use an interdisciplinary set of approaches to examine the cultural phenomenon of Renfests—approaches that include carnival theory (Bakhtin), gender studies (Halberstam, Drouin), play theory (Huizinga, Bateson,) and performance studies (Keyser, Taylor)—the primary theoretical basis for this thesis is a gender studies one, based on the concept of the performance of gender as articulated by Judith Butler in essays such as “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” Butler proposes that gender identity is not innate but rather constructed over time through the repetition of behaviors and that, indeed, gender is real “only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 194). Because, as Butler argues, the acts performed to demonstrate gender are a constantly active process and essentially arbitrary—that is, there are no acts that are inherently feminine or masculine, but rather only become so when society designates them as such—Butler also sees the possibility for transformation in breaking or subverting these repeated behaviors (Butler 188). The Renaissance faire appears to be a space where this interruption or subversion may take place. By examining the theatrically performed behaviors of Renfest actors, I find these moments of potential subversion as well as those that appear to reinscribe traditional gender norms, and consider their ultimate effects. As Butler states, “the performance [of gender] renders social laws explicit” (Butler 193); throughout this study, I explore just which social laws Renfest performances appear to be promoting (and subverting).
Although, as Butler argues, biological sex and gender are not causally linked—that is, one’s sex does not cause one’s gender—traditional Western gender norms presume a strong link between the two. According to Butler,

there is a sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex, or a real woman [or man], or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and […] this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another. (191)

In other words, prevailing cultural belief states that men and women exist as direct biological opposites, and their “natural” gendered behaviors are expected to reflect that same distinct opposition: men should be masculine and women should be feminine. While scholars like Butler (and others) have endeavored to disrupt this link between gender and sex, the connection to all appearances remains entrenched for many heterosexual individuals. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen not to take issue with this prevailing belief but rather to examine how gender at the festival operates within it.

But what does it mean to be “masculine” or “feminine”? Butler refers to “naturalized concepts of gender” (188) without explaining precisely what those concepts are. Indeed, referring to “traditional gender norms” or “received notions of gender” without detailing those notions appears to be so common in both feminist and gender studies discourse that such knowledge seems to be taken as a “given” at this point—as something that “everybody knows.” In order to provide something of a working definition of these received notions of gender, I suggest that traditional conceptions of femininity prescribe that women should be quiet, slender,
attractive, well-dressed, clean, caring, domestic, and accommodating, and that they must be sexual objects, not subjects (see Holliday). Male norms, on the other hand, “stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure, and a considerable amount of toughness in mind and body” (Sexton 15), and position men as sexual subjects rather than objects. While certainly not comprehensive or beyond debate, these brief definitions will hopefully serve as a general starting point for the examination of gender that comprises the body of this thesis.

It is perhaps obvious by this point that although Butler refutes the binary of male/female and takes issue with the heterosexual assumptions that underlie hegemonic discourse on gender, I have chosen not to engage that aspect of her work for this paper. I acknowledge that queer readings of the performances studied here are possible and interesting avenues for potential scholarship, but for the purposes of this paper, I am working within the culturally dominant, heteronormative male/female binary.

Before leaving my brief discussion of Butler behind, I want to be sure to note that Butler uses the word “performance” in her text(s) not to reference theatrical performance but rather to invoke something akin to Goffman’s concept of the performance of self in everyday life. In fact, Butler is careful to distinguish between “real life” and theatre, the crux of the distinction being the element of danger: because theatrical performance signals itself as “not real,” it more easily escapes the “punitive and regulatory social conventions” (Butler 194) that govern “real life.”

While she makes helpful distinctions here, we must not go so far as to assume Butler believes that the decreased degree of risk that accompanies theatrical gender performance renders such performances meaningless. Leaving Butlerian notions of performance behind for a

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3 For more on gender and sex roles, see Marie Richmond-Abbott’s *Masculine & Feminine: Gender Roles Over the Life Cycle.*
moment, a consideration of Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor’s work provides one way of thinking about the value of performance. According to Taylor, “[p]erformance […] functions as an episteme, a way of knowing” (Taylor xvi). Furthermore, Taylor claims, “[p]erformances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (Taylor 2). In other words, meaning is made through performance. With Butler and Taylor, then, I argue that “specific corporeal acts” (Butler 188) are constitutive of gender, and that, furthermore, when these gendered identities are embodied by actors they transmit knowledge about gender to audiences. This study is focused on discovering what, at Renaissance festivals, some of that “knowledge” might be.

In order to discuss particular aspects of the performances included in this study, I will be utilizing terminology developed by scholars Jennifer Drouin and Dorothy Keyser in their articles on cross-casting. First, Drouin establishes what editor James C. Bulman calls a “taxonomy of cross-dressing” (Bulman 15), arguing that “cross-dressing” has become an umbrella term used by scholars to convey a variety of different practices. Using a combination of contemporary queer theory, Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, and others, Drouin distinguishes the following three practices: cross-dressing is a theatrical practice and “an attempt to imitate the ‘real’” (Drouin 25); drag is “self-referential and sometimes parodic” (Drouin 26), highlighting its own artificiality; and passing is aimed not at highlighting the illusion of gender, but at “signify[ing] as real in the public sphere” (Drouin 30). According to Drouin, these practices are by no means mutually exclusive or stable; slippages between drag and passing are not always easy to avoid, and an actor can engage in both cross-dressing and passing simultaneously. In order to determine which of these terms most accurately identify a character’s behavior, Drouin suggests, we must
consider not only the intent of the actor and the character, but also the reception of others, both inside and outside the world of the performance.

Dorothy Keyser, in her work on baroque opera, distinguishes between “convention” and “device” in the theatre, defining *convention* as “discrepant elements that the audience is expected to ignore” (like the “fourth wall”) and *device* as “discrepant elements introduced deliberately to draw the audience’s attention to some aspect of the production” (Keyser 46). Scholar Julia Prest, in her work on cross-gendered casting in the seventeenth century, *Theatre Under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet and Opera*. In it, she utilizes Keyser’s concepts and terminology “precisely to examine when cross-casting is used simply as a convention and when it is used as a device, and to what effect” (Prest 2). Part of the work of this thesis will emulate Prest’s aim, using Drouin’s taxonomy and Keyser’s concepts to examine Renaissance festival performances.

It’s important to note at this point that the focus of this study is on the gender messages that may be found in select Renaissance faire performances and does not attempt to examine the reason(s) Renfests seem to permit a greater range of gender and identity play than “real life.” This question has been tackled by several of the Renaissance faire scholars whose work was profiled earlier in this chapter, and they have created a fairly comprehensive discourse on the festival space as an “other” space. Moore, for one, uses Bakhtin’s notion of carnival to explain the topsy-turvy world of the festival. Kim, too, invokes the carnivalesque nature of the festival, examining the escape from societal norms and conventions, rites of reversal, and experimentation with and creation of new individual and group identities. Like Kim, Gunnels explores issues of identity, tackling issues of authenticity, both the subjective (identity of self, which she argues is allowed to blossom at the festival) and objective (historical authenticity,
which she suggests can, if too strict, inhibit identity play). Finally, Korol puts a spin on Turner’s work with liminality and establishes the intrastice while also including elements of carnival in her work. Taken as a whole, the scholarship done on the festival space shows it to be an intrasticial carnivalesque space where identity and gender play can take place, and my study not only accepts but is based on this conception of the Renaissance festival.

Furthermore, I believe that it is the element of play, a key component of the carnivalesque, that is central to the performances included in this study. In the words of Henry Bial, “[w]e play to escape, to step out of everyday existence, if only for a moment, and to observe a different set of rules” (Bial 135)—precisely the effect that carnival offers. While a method for determining what is or isn’t play is difficult to come by \(^4\), scholars like Bial and Johan Huizinga are clear on one thing: play has meaning. Bial, for example, explains that “play is […] important, for it demands risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives” (Bial 135), and Huizinga argues that “[i]n play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (137). The playful performance seen on the Renaissance festival stage, then, makes meaning not only because it is performance (Taylor), but also because it is play.

One last concern for the status of the festival space as “other” needs to be briefly considered before moving on: Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. While no scholar thus far has explored the festival space as a heterotopia, Foucault recognizes the festival (and here he is using the term generically, not in reference to Renaissance faires) as a heterotopic space (Foucault 26). Foucault defines a heterotopia as a physically present place where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24).

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\(^4\) See Johan Huizinga’s “The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon” or Gregory Bateson’s “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” for definitions of play.
Echoes of carnival can certainly be found in this definition, and with the carnivalesque qualities of the Renaissance festival established by Renfest scholars, it is a short leap to the festival as heterotopia. However, because the focus of my study is not on why the festival space functions as it does but rather how performance and play create meaning specifically about gender within that space, I will not make that leap here but will leave it for other scholars to pursue.

Because of the small number of direct scholarly sources for the study of Renaissance festivals, I have also used non-academic sources in conducting this study. Programs, press releases, and marketing materials from the Michigan and Ohio Renaissance Festivals were used, as were each festival’s web site. Much of the analysis in the study comes from my extensive field notes, which included descriptions of performances and other events at each of the festivals as well as my reflections as a researcher on these events. The web sites of the performance groups featured in chapters 1-3 also provided background information, and several web sites dedicated to kilt wearing were referenced for my work on Tartanic in chapter 2.

Lastly, the interdisciplinary nature of this study has also required me to call on a variety of scholarly works not specifically related to Renaissance faires or Butlerian studies, including those by Philip Auslander, J.L. Austin, Judith Halberstam, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and Robert Walser, to name a few.

And Now, On With the Show

One of the best things about Renaissance festivals is the nearly limitless number of stories that can be told about them. The festival itself has a story, as does each performance, performer, and visitor. Furthermore, they each have different but coexisting narratives—some created within the festival world; some created outside of it—and the boundaries for those stories can easily become blurred. While no one study can account for all of the possible narratives
occurring within a festival, the following chapter begins to explore some of the stories that can be created when viewing a handful of specific festival performances. We begin, as royal privilege would dictate, with none other than Her Royal Majesty, the Queen, and her dueling knights.
CHAPTER 1:

“QUEENS OF THE KNIGHT:” ROYALTY, NOBILITY, AND GENDER AT THE RENAISSANCE FAIRE

A quick look at the marketing materials for many Renaissance festivals offers evidence that there are specific performances spectators can—and likely do—expect to see; performances that are emblematic of the festival and give the event a more intense “Renaissance-ness,” so to speak. These performances, I would argue, tend to coalesce around a few very specific characters, the two most important being the Queen (or at some festivals, the King), and the knight. Because these iconic gendered figures are a staple of the festival and draw a large number of spectators to their events, they are the most highly visible markers of how gender is both normed and put into question in the space of the festival.

Fig. 2: The Ohio Renaissance Festival’s web site. ©2008 Ohio Renaissance Festival. All rights reserved.
The “shire” of both festivals I visited were ruled by “Queen Elizabeth,” with Michigan referring to their Queen as “Queen Elizabeth Glorianna [sic]” (“2008 Michigan Renaissance Festival: The Legend Becomes You”), a title inspired apparently by Edmund Spenser’s name for Elizabeth in The Faerie Queen, while Ohio referred to their Queen as “Elizabeth I” (“Experience 400 Years of Fun in a Single Day”). On the grounds, however, both Elizabeths were most commonly referred to as simply “The Queen” or “Her Majesty.”

Before discussing each of the Queens in greater detail, it is important to recognize that not all festivals are ruled by female sovereigns. As previously mentioned, some faires are overseen by Kings—often Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, whose notorious reign provides a variety of tales that can be used to create intrigue on the grounds. Korol, for example, details the Maryland Renaissance Festival’s 2004 storyline, “The Year of the 3 Queens,” which condensed the stories of festival monarch Henry VIII’s relationships with Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and Katherine of Aragon into one nine-hour festival day; by the end, two of the wives are dead, and the third is newly betrothed to the king. (Korol 129-163). A quick review of the websites of twenty or so of the largest faires (annual attendance of over 100,000) shows them to be split almost evenly between rule by Kings (and usually their accompanying Queens) and Queens alone. It is also interesting to note the degree to which individual faires foreground the presence of and oversight by royalty on their web sites, with some festivals making the royal presence a feature of the site and others seeming to bury royal information in press releases or embedding it only allusively in other events. For the purposes of this study, however, I have chosen to focus on two festivals that feature a ruling Queen, as those sites ruled by a female sovereign throw questions of gender into particularly stark relief.
Because of the aforementioned allocation of gender among reigning royalty across U.S. festivals, my examination of the Queen’s role at the Ohio and Michigan Renaissance faires must necessarily be considered specific to those festivals, with the possibility of extrapolation to other festivals that feature a Queen as their ruling monarch. Festivals headed by Kings will naturally demonstrate a different dynamic than that explored here (although the presence of a Queen in conjunction with the King raises interesting questions).

Although both the Ohio and Michigan festivals included a female sovereign, the two Queens seemed to behave and function quite differently. Ohio’s Queen Elizabeth I, played by actress Erin Riddle, was a young Queen, perhaps in her twenties, with long red hair and a sweet, freckled face. Michigan’s Queen, Elizabeth Glorianna, was portrayed by actress Caroline Jett in her eighth season in the role (“Welcome to the Michigan Renaissance Festival” np). Jett was more mature, perhaps in her forties, striking in her regal beauty, with her red hair swept back in a bun. While both women were richly dressed, Elizabeth I seemed less so and tended to both physically and behaviorally blend in with her court; at my first encounter with the Queen and her attendants on the Ohio Festival grounds, I did not realize she was indeed the Queen until she was addressed as such. Elizabeth Glorianna, on the other hand, was unmistakably the reigning monarch at all times, and I was able to recognize her as such from a distance and with no immediate oral confirmation. The presence of each Queen on the grounds and at events throughout the faire was quite different, as well: whereas Elizabeth Glorianna could be seen enjoying lunch with her court near the bridge, overseeing the various daily Jousts and Tournaments, and attending the day-end pub sing, Elizabeth I seemed nearly invisible on the grounds and attended neither the Joust nor the final pub sing. Elizabeth I did participate in a Knighting Ceremony for (mainly) children each day as well as competing as a player (not a
piece) in the human chess matches, but overall, her appearances seemed not only different but less frequent than that of Elizabeth Glorianna.

Whether Elizabeth I’s lack of visibility on the grounds was intentional or simply incidental—perhaps she and I were simply on different rotations around the grounds during each of my visits—it’s worth considering what her relative absence may (again, intentionally or not) communicate about gender and specifically about women in power. Elizabeth I seemed only to appear for ceremonial events with children or frolicsome ones like the human chess game and her absence from the Joust denied her the chance to demonstrate her authority in a very public, large-scale way. Coupled with her relative invisibility on the grounds, I had to wonder just who was overseeing the shire. Certainly, further analysis of Elizabeth I’s performance at the Ohio Renaissance Festival would be appropriate here, but because of the limited amount of time she appeared at the festival, I must necessarily restrict my comments to these observations.

![Fig. 3: Ohio’s Queen Elizabeth I (Erin Riddle) with Lord Leceister (Michael Dean Connelly).](image)

Elizabeth Glorianna, on the other hand, not only had a consistent presence on the grounds, but routinely called upon the deference due her as Queen. Her daily audience, for example, was held on the stage adjacent to the Field of Honor just after the morning Joust, as hundreds of visitors meandered by and a dozen or so assembled to pay their respects. The daily
parade, which extended across a major portion of the festival grounds, featured the Queen as the only participant drawn in a small wheeled cart. Throughout the day, the Queen traversed the grounds, happening upon guests and performers alike, asking probing questions, offering her approval of events, or requesting a favor. Finally, Elizabeth Glorianna was present at and ruled over every Joust and Tournament (four per day), her most public display of sovereignty (which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter). Because Ohio’s Elizabeth I was less available for study due to the amount of time she spent on the grounds and at events, my examination of the role of the Queen in this chapter will be based primarily on the performance of Caroline Jett as Elizabeth Glorianna at the Michigan Renaissance Festival.

Fig. 4: Michigan’s Queen Elizabeth Glorianna (Caroline Jett). Photo by Mark Moore, courtesy of The Michigan Renaissance Festival
With these two very different female rulers, visitors may be left with conflicting ideas about women in power. Sweet, smiling, and friendly, Elizabeth I did not seem to be a ruling sovereign exuding authority and respect but rather a trophy figurehead, something trotted out for ceremonial occasions and faire decoration. Elizabeth Glorianna, while still friendly and approachable, consistently asserted her royal privilege and reinforced her status throughout the day in a variety of ways. Her authority was not only evident, but with the Joust in particular, was accompanied by material consequences: while the Ohio Renaissance Festival seemed as if it could have carried on without its Queen, several events at the Michigan Renaissance Festival were performed as if they would not occur without the Queen’s permission.

In my experience, Renaissance festivals generally create a “frame story” for the festival, which provides a unifying and organizing concept for the cast (i.e., the royal court, local officials, village commoners, etc.) and performers (i.e., Ample and Trite, the Zucchini Brothers, The Limeybirds) to shape their performances toward. Some festivals use these frame stories sparingly, allowing individual performances to operate without connection to the larger theme, while other festivals are characterized by the infiltration of the frame story into many of the performances that occur on the festival grounds each day. I recall one year in particular at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Festival where the frame story was centered on the competition between two rival noblemen for the love of Queen Elizabeth. This frame story permeated a number of the events of the festival for that year, including the Human Chess Match and the Joust, and it was the “talk of the town” during many of the staged performances. Not only did the frame story provide the cast material for use in order to “gossip” with visitors, but both the cast and non-cast performers took opportunities to align themselves with their preferred suitor. For
this festival and this frame story, opportunities to reiterate and reinforce the story were seldom missed.

At the Michigan Festival, however, the frame story did not play an integral role for the cast or performers; in fact, even after visiting the festival on four separate occasions, I was unaware of any frame story whatsoever. (Upon following up with the Festival, I learned that a story did exist—the Mayor's daughter had fallen in love with the bandit Aaron, who was also one of the Queen's guards—but because this story was not evident or even known during my period of observation, it will not come to bear on this thesis.) In the absence of an explicit frame, visitors like myself can use the festival’s preponderance of individual performances and publicity images to create a sort of generic story for the event; in Michigan’s case, for me, this gelled around the idea of a basic “celebration in honor of the queen.”

Indeed, it was consistently clear that the shire of Holly Grove was a territory of Queen Elizabeth Glorianna, and all who were present in the shire were subject to her authority. The Queen’s presence was regularly greeted by cast and performers—as well as some visitors—by bows and curtsies, as well cries of “long live the Queen!” As a testament to the Queen’s authority, I noted that both during performances and while walking the grounds, whether scripted or not, her word was followed without argument or hesitation, by both cast members/performers and visitors alike. Furthermore, Jett, in her role as the Queen, clearly expected the deference and obedience she received; her bearing and attitude conveyed a commitment to the role she was playing, thereby eliciting belief by others. Jett seemed to understand what was expected of a “good” Queen in the festival world and her subjects responded appropriately and with delight; her play as the Queen stimulated play in others.
Most visitors to the festival recognize that the Queen holds no “real” power—disobeying her will not result in any true punishment or consequence—and that any legal authority that exists at the festival is held by the festival administrative staff and local authorities. However, in nearly all cases, the pretend power of the Queen is upheld and reinforced by the cast, performers, and visitors, which places the Queen—a female—in the ostensibly highest and most powerful position within the Renfest world.

The Queen arguably exhibits this power most obviously when presiding over the Joust, where her gender is highlighted and marked by that of the knights. During the Joust, the Queen exercises the “masculine” trait of authority as sovereign while at the same time being praised by the knights for her feminine beauty. While the majority of the Joust’s action is admittedly undertaken by the knights, it is the Queen’s permission which makes the event possible, and it is her approval that participants aim to earn. Before undertaking a close look at the Joust, however, let me say a few words about those armor-clad participants, the knights.

A quick review of the twenty web sites mentioned earlier reveals that roughly three out of four of the sites include an image of a knight (usually participating in the Joust) on the main page, with about half of those featuring the knight as the dominant image on the page (although sometimes included with a series of other images in a rotating .gif). (Revealingly, the second most popular main image was that of the court or royal couple.) The mailed marketing materials for the Ohio Renaissance Festival also featured the jousting knight as the foremost image, as did the program cover and posters for the Michigan Renaissance Festival. The marketing staff for each of these festivals clearly relies on the lure and iconic status of the knight to attract visitors and brand their event, and the inclusion of these knightly images invites visitors to expect that they will see such knights when they visit.
The knight is an important figure in the social configuration of the Renaissance festival; as a member of the upper classes, he offers a degree of male authority that seemingly counters and balances the female authority of the Queen. These titled men also represent perhaps the festival’s only upper-class example of what contemporary audiences perceive as Renaissance masculinity; while there are often men included in the Queen’s court, they can sometimes tend towards the effeminate, vain, or ridiculous, and generally do not engage in physical combat or other demonstrations of what we might regard as traditional masculine prowess.

Unlike the Queen and her court, however, knights tend to participate in a very specific performance (the Joust or Tournament) and to be seen only at these events. They generally do not roam the festival grounds interacting with visitors, and access to them is prohibited or granted only for a brief period following the conclusion of their performance. The knight, therefore, remains something of a mysterious character while the Queen’s availability and interaction tend to invite a greater feeling of intimacy between character and visitors. Because the privileged masculinity of the knights is the only masculine counterpart to the privileged femininity of the Queen, any discussion of the Joust must then include considerations of how both the Queen’s and the knight’s performances reflect and comment upon each other.

The Joust and Tournament, therefore, become crucial performances to examine. Not only are these performances the only ones in which the otherwise elusive knights participate, but they are also where the Queen performs for the largest number of audience members. In the Joust and Tournament, the two most iconic figures of the festival come together, offering the best (and, for the knights, the only) opportunity to study them and to examine the gender-specific messages their combined performances contain.
The Joust and Tournament at the Michigan Renaissance Festival take place at the Field of Honor, a large, flat expanse of ground located at the far end of the festival. This strategically-placed venue, arguably the heart of the grounds, seems to be cleverly situated to require visitors to pass through (and hopefully patronize) a gauntlet of shops and food stands before reaching the highly-anticipated space. Whereas the rest of the festival terrain includes slopes and hillocks surrounded and sometimes nearly invaded by tall, leafy trees, the Field of Honor is an exposed plane surrounded not by trees but by long wooden benches (on two sides) and rows of hay bales (on one side) for seating that accommodated, by my best guess, approximately 600 audience members (the largest audience for any of the festival shows). The Jousting area is an earth-filled rectangle bounded by a three-foot high fence on all sides and a two-story high royal viewing stand attached to its flank, making it the only performance space on the grounds with a dividing barrier between its performers and audience (presumably for safety reasons). During the 2008 season, Jousts occurred three times each festival day, with a Combat Tournament just after the day’s final Joust.

Fig. 5: The Field of Honor at the Michigan Renaissance Festival
While I suspect that for the majority of festival attendees the two events—the Joust and the Tournament—are interchangeable, there are differences between them. Essentially, the Joust features knights on horseback battling each other with lances, which in many cases eventually leads to hand-to-hand armed combat, while the Tournament focuses on horseback skill competitions (which can still sometimes lead to hand-to-hand combat). The skills included in the Tournament include tests of aim and accuracy like retrieving as many rings as possible with one’s lance (the sexual imagery of which is worth noting) or throwing an axe at a target, both while on a moving horse. As will be seen, however, festivals tend to combine the elements of each of these events, rendering the distinction between the two practically immaterial for spectators.

At the Michigan Festival, I witnessed performances of both events. Each began much the same: as audiences started to gather (as early as thirty minutes prior to the event), the knights’ squires entered the combat ring and began to prepare the weapons and props for the performance. While the squires I observed at the Joust were all male, the Tournament I observed (on a separate day) included female squires, as well. The squires were young, perhaps in their early teens, and did not seem to be portraying any sort of character or persona. One squire, for instance, a teenaged boy, was quite interested in flirting with two teenaged girls who had arrived to watch the event, but did not do so in a way that indicated a Renaissance persona. Had the squires been in character, they might warrant more attention in this study, particularly as potentially illuminating information might arise from observing a more ‘authentic’ knight-squire relationship. The presence of this kind of interaction at other festivals would undoubtedly

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5 See Gunnels, page 142.
provide opportunities for this kind of investigation, but for the festivals in this study, no such examination is possible.

Shortly before the event began, Queen Elizabeth and her court also gathered in the viewing stand (although not all of the court arrived at once), but there was no announcement of the Queen’s arrival. The formal performance began with the entry of the knights and the Mistress of the Lists, Dame Catherine, a sort of emcee for the event. Despite her status as a woman of privilege, Dame Catherine rode her horse astride rather than side saddle, yet she retained an essentially feminine costume. Her garb consisted of the tight-fitting bodice and long, full skirt worn by the women of the Queen’s court, made of sumptuous fabric and ornamented with richly detailed trim. However, Dame Catherine’s costume also included a pair of pants underneath what was actually a split skirt, so that she was able to drape the skirt appealingly over the horse’s flanks and ride astride while maintaining her decency. (To the best of my knowledge, no such garment existed during the Renaissance; this costume is instead a contemporary take on Renaissance fashion, modified for modern riding practices, which are not differentiated by sex.) In all other respects, however, her costume and appearance were as regal and feminine as any of the members of the Queen’s court.

Catherine was not listed in the program, either amongst the Royal Court or Holly Grove’s street characters. In fact, no females in the program were listed with the title of “Dame,” the female equivalent of “Sir” (the title given to each of the knights as well as a few of the members of the Royal Court). These two facts lead me to believe that Dame Catherine was a member of the company that supplied the knights for the jousting and games of skill, EmoMojo Inc.’s Hardcore Horsemen. (According to the company’s web site, EmoMojo Inc. provided the jousting for two festivals in 2008: the Great Lakes Medieval Faire and the Michigan Renaissance
Festival.) It’s important to distinguish here between performers that are employees and part of the cast of the Michigan Renaissance Festival and those who belong to a company that has been contracted by the Festival. The Queen, her court, and the street performers that comprise the festival’s in-house cast are individual actors that have been hired by the Festival and assembled into a company. Their performances are created through collaboration between themselves and the Festival staff, and they are subject to the authority of the Michigan Renaissance Festival. The knights, on the other hand, are employed by EmoMojo, Inc. and operate in partnership with but are generally independent from the Michigan Renaissance Festival. This relationship likely accounts in part for the scarcity of the knights on the grounds, as they are not trained in the improvisational skills of the Festival cast and are assigned duties by EmoMojo Inc., not the Michigan Renaissance Festival.

Fig. 6: Dame Catherine, Mistress of the Lists at the Michigan Renaissance Festival
Dame Catherine, as a member of the specialized company managed by EmoMojo Inc., would therefore have a thorough familiarity with the events of the Joust and Tournament, knowing what to expect and how to handle issues that arise. Equipped with a wireless microphone so that she can be heard by all, she is the liaison between the knights and their audience, which includes the Queen. She is responsible for introducing each of the event’s competitors to the spectators and to the Queen, and she explains the events the spectators are about to see. Rather than providing an educational lecture on the joust, however, Dame Catherine more often highlights the “danger” of what the audience is about to see, thereby endeavoring to increase the excitement of the event. Catherine also essentially oversees the entire contest, directing the knights when to spur their horses into battle, identifying the victor, and singling out those who are disqualified, according to the rules of the Joust/Tournament.

After introducing each competitor, Dame Catherine allows each knight a few words. Generally, this time is spent peacock, as it were: the knights badmouth their adversaries, enumerate their masculine abilities, and elicit the cheers of their supporters (determined by section of the audience). Some knights use this opportunity to address their followers directly, as did “my” knight when he declared to the section of which I was a part, “Give me your strength and cheers, I will give you victory!” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008). My section naturally replied with a roar of approval. Knights may also choose to address the Queen and her court at this time. Sir Eric, a competing knight during one of my visits, at one performance informed the Queen, “Your radiance is so lovely, it almost makes me not want to kill those three bastards” (field notes Sept. 6, 2008). On another day, a different competitor addressed the “beautiful ladies” of the Queen’s court, announcing, “I shall win the field for you this day” (along with several other lofty, complimentary declarations) (field notes Aug. 31, 2008). As a form of gender performance
and play, declarations like these serve to reinforce perceived traditional gender norms: they restrict action—killing and winning—to the masculine knights, while the Queen is praised for her feminine beauty.

The competitions at the Michigan Festival included four knights, and as each knight has his say, it usually becomes clear who the “bad guy” is. One of my knight’s opponents, for example, made rude gestures, welcomed taunts, and spat at my knight. In addition to signaling his status as a “good” or “bad” guy, each knight also appeals to his particular section of the audience for support, directing spectators to cheer for his rhetoric as well as his physical efforts.

After knights and their supporters are established, Dame Catherine requests the Queen’s permission to assess the field’s battle-readiness, which the Queen naturally grants. Suggestions for doing so are elicited from the knights, some of which include conducting a peeing contest or grabbing a wench and having a kissing contest. The Queen, however, chastises the knights, indicating that contests such as these are “not appropriate knightly activities to happen upon a field of tournament” and calls instead for “a tilting at the rings” (video Sept. 6, 2008). The winner of these preparatory events is recognized, and the victor often declares one of his female supporters “a queen of love and beauty” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008), in honor of his accomplishment.

After determining the field’s readiness, the formal Joust is set to begin, again with the Queen’s permission. Two knights are selected to make the first pass, charging toward each other on horseback and aiming their lances; armored shields are used to protect the knights and bear the brunt of the lance’s contact. Lances are often broken—in fact, I would suggest that the audience expects them to be, sometimes more often than they are—and the clamor of racing horses with clashing wood and metal makes for a terrific acoustic experience. Only a few passes
with the lance are completed before one of the knights is unhorsed and the victor moves on to another knight. Eventually, only one knight is left on horseback and Dame Catherine announces that the fighting should continue on foot. Comparatively speaking, the knights spend less time in the competition on horseback than they do on the ground. The hand-to-hand combat is laced again with taunts and disparaging remarks by the rivals as well as with Entertainment Wrestling-inspired moves. In the end, Dame Catherine recognizes the victor and the Queen commends him for his win, recognizes the other competitors for their effort, and thanks the visitors for their support. Dame Catherine then offers a farewell to the audience, and as the court and spectators leave the Field area, she remains behind, still on horseback, to talk with festival-goers.

Fig. 7: Knights prepare for the Joust at the Michigan Renaissance Festival. Photo by Mark Moore, courtesy of the Michigan Renaissance Festival
Throughout the Joust/Tournament, the Queen watched with great but contained interest, without rooting for a particular favorite, as the crowd was invited to do (and did so enthusiastically). At the end, she expressed gratitude for the knights’ reverence and their competition for her recognition, and congratulated the winners of each event with an equal degree of commendation. At all times during the Joust and Tournament, she retained an appropriately regal but not ungrateful or disinterested aloofness.

Despite its subtlety, the Queen’s presence at the Michigan Joust is constructed as powerful. What happens then at the Ohio Joust, where the Queen is not present to exert such authority? In some ways, the Queen’s absence seems to have little effect. The Ohio Joust had many elements that were similar to the Michigan Joust, in terms of the events offered and general structure of the competition. Whereas the Michigan Joust was overseen by a Mistress of the Lists wearing a well-functioning microphone (as described above), however, the Ohio event was overseen by a young, gangly, plainly dressed male with an ill- and eventually non-functioning microphone. The audibility at the Michigan event heavily favored the confident and spectacularly-dressed Dame Catherine, with significant portions of the knights’ speeches and comments discernible to only a select portion of the audience. The Ohio event’s aural configuration, on the other hand, was precisely opposite that of Michigan: the non-functioning microphone of the announcer caused many of his words to be lost, but the knights, who were used to performing without amplification, and with the advantage of what I estimate to be a smaller playing area, were considerably easier to hear, resulting in my greater focus on their comments than on the young man’s. In the end, it would seem that Michigan’s Joust was not only conducted under female authority (of both the Queen and Dame Catherine), but that its dominant voice was also a female one. The Ohio competition, on the other hand, seemed to
occur under a self-regulating male power structure, with its primary—in fact, only—vocal
eexpression being male.

Unlike in Michigan, only two knights participated in the jousting and skill competitions
at the Ohio Festival, and there were a number of differences in the setup of the field, the armor
worn, the lances used, the fight choreography, etc., between the two. While the variations in field
setup and fight choreography do not have significant bearing on the study undertaken here,
several of the other differences may be considered indicators of “degree” of masculinity. For
example, wearing significantly more armor, as the Ohio knights did, may be read as more
masculine either due to the strength and stamina required to wear it or the armor’s status as an
icon of knighthood. At the same time, the increased protection offered by the additional armor
may render it a sign of insufficient masculinity, as the notions of toughness that accompany
traditional masculine gender norms could be interpreted as requiring greater risk of bodily harm
and decreased reliance on protection by anything but one’s own strength and skill. In other
words, the most masculine knights may argue, “We don’t need no stinking armor!”

The Ohio Joust featured lances that were noticeably thinner than those used at Michigan,
which may be read as requiring less strength to handle and less stamina to withstand, but these
lances splintered more often and more spectacularly than those used at Michigan, offering
audiences more of the auditory and visual spectacle they were, as evidenced by their lusty
cheers, eager to witness. (Amusingly, pieces of splintered lance were sold as souvenirs after each
Joust.) The tests of skill at Ohio seemed more difficult than those undertaken at Michigan,
allowing the Ohio knights to perhaps demonstrate a greater degree of ability than the Michigan
knights. The Michigan knights’ skill competition, for example, focused mainly on the lancing of
rings on horseback, while the Ohio knights performed tasks such as using a sword to slice a
cabbage placed on a squire’s head, also on horseback. Despite the differences between the Ohio and Michigan knights, the values projected by each group were nonetheless similar: physical prowess, bravery, courage, tenacity, confidence, etc. The Ohio knights, however, because neither the Queen or Mistress of the Lists was present to validate and reify their masculine traits, seem to have felt compelled to engage in more difficult, more spectacular, and more “manly” acts than the Michigan competitors. It would seem that for the knights, Elizabeth I’s indirect approval of the event lacked the impressive directness of Elizabeth Glorianna’s, but fortunately the event’s occurrence showed no signs of being in jeopardy, in spite of the absence of royal pomp and circumstance to sanction it.
The most significant differences resulting from the Queen’s absence at Ohio, I would argue, were the ways in which the knights sought favor for their efforts. The banter of the Ohio knights echoed that of the Michigan knights, and, in my experience, can be considered representative of typical knightly wordplay and boasting. On the day I came to observe the knights “knock the living snot out of each other” (as the announcer so eloquently put it) (field notes Sept. 12, 2008), “my” knight was Sir Theodore, a knight, we were informed, who was “actually single and enjoys long walks on the beach” (field notes Sept. 12, 2008), a clear appeal to the heterosexual female members of the audience, who seem to act as fillers for the vacuum created in this scenario by the Queen’s absence. After Sir Theodore and his adversary had each been introduced, roses were bestowed by each of them on a woman chosen from their section of the audience. The enemy knight bestowed his rose first, informing Sir Theodore that “all the beautiful women are in my section” (field notes Sept. 12, 2008); in fact, he declared, “Even our bearded women are better than yours!” (field notes Sept. 12, 2008). Sir Theodore’s opponent continued his ribbing as Sir Theodore selected his lady; after the announcer asked Sir Theodore, “Who have you chosen this day?” the opposing knight quickly interjected, “Yes, what’s his name?” (field notes Sept. 12, 2008) (which, by way of being an insult, affirms the knights’ heterosexuality). Furthermore, after Sir Theodore identified his chosen lady, his adversary came to Sir Theodore’s side of the jousting field and began hitting on said lady right under Sir Theodore’s nose. (There were, however, no immediate repercussions for this bold knight.) Without their Queen—the standard of feminine approval in the shire—available to validate the knights’ masculine efforts, they turned to the Queen’s surrogates, her female subjects (i.e., the female spectators).
The events of both the Ohio and Michigan Jousts are, in my experience, typical of what happens at many Renaissance faire Joust events. Although the absence of the Queen at the Ohio faire was unusual, the assemblage of knights and horses, lances and armor, skill contests and jousts on horseback is characteristic of this festival staple. Typical also are the roles attributed to each gender: while between the two festivals both women and men can be seen participating in supervisory capacities, men alone undertake the aggressive, physically demanding roles of the jousting field. At least, that had been my experience not only at these two festivals but at every other festival I have attended. One particular mid-season (September 6, 2008) Joust performance at the Michigan Renaissance Festival, however, proved to be a surprising exception to the rule by featuring a female knight.

Introduced as Sir Morgan of Ork (or perhaps Auk?), Sir Morgan was identified by Dame Catherine as the first female to grace the jousting field at Michigan (but no mention was made in the day’s program of this momentous occasion). However, should any doubt exist about Sir Morgan’s fitness for battle, Queen Elizabeth demonstrated her support for Sir Morgan’s involvement by stating from her viewing stand for all to hear that “anything a man can do, so can a woman” (field notes Sept. 6, 2008).

Sir Morgan was not a particularly feminine-looking woman, wearing no makeup to soften her short brown hair and square jaw. She wore the same type of costume as the other knights (which undoubtedly helped obscure her breasts), and, unlike the Mistress of the Lists, used the title of “Sir” rather than its feminine equivalent, “Dame.” In fact, had Sir Morgan not been identified as female, I suspect that her sex may have gone unnoticed by much of the audience altogether. Because her sex was marked by Dame Catherine, however, I suggest that calling Morgan “Sir” functions as what J.L Austin calls a speech act; that by calling Morgan “Sir,”
Dame Catherine and the Queen constitute Morgan’s identity as a knight (who is by definition masculine), despite her sex.

Fig. 9: Sir Morgan, the first female knight at the Michigan Renaissance Festival

Indeed, Sir Morgan’s performance was directly in line with that of the other (male) knights. She engaged in the same banter and peacock, and suggested a drinking contest in order to test the readiness of the field that day (notably steering clear of suggesting peeing or kissing contests, which would have drawn attention to her sexual difference). Sir Morgan’s skill in the ring competition proved to be excellent; she retrieved all three rings in the event (not unusual, although that day at least one male knight earned only two rings). Sir Morgan’s expertise in the formal Joust, however, appeared much less certain. To begin, Sir Morgan’s horse became agitated as she was waiting for battle, and she had difficulty controlling him. In the three
passes between Sir Morgan and her opponent, no blows were clearly landed by either competitor, and during their fourth pass, Morgan’s adversary essentially stopped his horse in order for her to strike him. Sir Morgan was (perhaps mercifully) unhorsed during the next pass but continued in the hand-to-hand combat, defeating a male knight with a final kick to the groin (a moment which highlights again the difference between Morgan’s sex and that of the other knights) before another (male) knight went on to ultimate victory. Despite these difficulties, however, Sir Morgan is one of the Michigan Renaissance Festival’s best examples of the performed nature of gender (per Butler). Sir Morgan upends the common cultural assumption of a “natural” causal relationship between biological sex and gender, instead highlighting the Butlerian notion that acts constitute gender; her actions inscribe the masculine gender identity of the knight on her biologically female body (which she then of course subverts by in fact being female).

At this point it seems appropriate to bring Judith Halberstam’s work on feminine masculinity to bear on Sir Morgan’s performance. Halberstam claims that “female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach” (360). According to Halberstam, then, the feminine masculinity performed by Sir Morgan should be met with censure by the heteronormatively-oriented audience. Such disapproval, however, was not in evidence. While individual spectators may have had differing reactions to the presence of Sir Morgan, the crowd at large accepted her knightly and therefore masculine performance. Why?

Halberstam’s claim that “heterosexual female masculinity […] often […] represents an acceptable degree of female masculinity as compared to the excessive masculinity of the dyke” (371) may have some traction here. Because Sir Morgan’s performance steered clear of any
romantic or sexual moments, the audience could choose to see her as heterosexual—a “tomboy” rather than a lesbian—and therefore more “acceptable.” I suggest, however, that it is more significantly the carnivalesque nature of the festival that motivates the audience to allow and even support this gender and identity play.

In unpacking Sir Morgan’s performance both Drouin’s and Keyser’s tools come in handy. Because Sir Morgan’s performance was not parodic (at least no more so than that of the other knights), she is not engaging in drag. But because both Dame Catherine and the Queen drew attention to Morgan’s sex at the start of the performance, she cannot be considered as passing, either. It would seem, then, that Morgan is engaging in simple theatrical cross-dressing, an attempt to imitate the “real” physical appearance of the knight, who is, by definition, male. At the same time, because Sir Morgan’s sex was foregrounded at the start of the event (by two women, nonetheless), the spectators are signaled to read it as unusual and noteworthy (the sex of the male knights needed no attention, for it is the assumed and “natural” sex for a knight). This attention could position Sir Morgan’s sex as a device, an incongruity that the audience is supposed to recognize. However, a device is also intended to draw attention to a particular aspect of a production, but Sir Morgan’s performance was clearly not intended to provoke a “battle of the sexes” narrative. Her gender was never part of the competition’s knightly banter, and her performance, which was more or less in line with the masculine performance of the male knights, did more to erase gender difference than play it up. With Morgan performing thusly, it would seem that her unusual female presence functioned as a convention, something that should go essentially unnoticed by the spectators. In the end, I suggest that while the function of Morgan’s sex is neither clearly device nor convention, her gender role is unambiguously conventional: while the audience may be aware of the cross-dressed female body performing,
they expect (and are generally given) a performance that aligns with the masculine expectations of the knight.

While the Joust and Tournament are the only events at which one may observe the behavior of knights, the Queen participates in other performances at each of the festivals that allow additional insight into the Queen’s dissemination of ideas regarding gender expectations. At the Michigan Festival, for example, an audience with the Queen is granted each day, an event that offers visitors the chance to greet the Queen personally and pay their respects. This performance is conducted on a small stage directly behind the Queen’s viewing platform at the Field of Honor, where the Queen and select members of her court assemble under the stage’s canopy and receive guests. At this event, however, the Queen does not wear a microphone, and because she is engaging in more intimate conversations with individual subjects, her comments are not generally audible for onlookers. I did, however note two intriguing moments during the Queen’s August 31, 2008 audience. First, a female visitor, dressed in traditionally feminine garb, approached the Queen and bowed rather than curtsied. Second, another female visitor arrived for the audience dressed essentially in traditional male attire—loose-fitting black pants, tall black leather boots, a loose red pirate-style shirt, a black vest, and a feathered black cavalier-style hat—and also bowed to the Queen. The Queen made no comment to either woman about their “inappropriate” actions, or to the second woman about her attire, suggesting that affective experience on the part of guests may be more important than having a pretend queen policing personal performance for the sake of the simulation. Furthermore, the Queen’s behavior here reminds us that although normative gender roles were part of the Joust’s major narrative, the

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6 At other festivals, however, cast members provide instruction to visitors on the proper way to show reverence to royalty (bows for men, curtsies for women). See Korol 134.
festival is still functioning in a carnivalesque way, allowing the normative template to easily be suspended or ignored without reprisal.

Elizabeth I, Ohio’s Queen, did not offer a daily audience, but did participate each day in a Knighting Ceremony, held in a structure called “St. Peter’s Church” (which indeed resembled a church) which was located on an upper level of the festival grounds. The ceremony, which appeared to be open to all festival guests but was geared mainly towards children, begins with announcements and preparations by the Queen’s cousin, a Countess. Those gathered are informed that they are in attendance at the “Knighting and Princessing Ceremony,” but that girls can, if they so choose, be knighted, receiving the title of “Dame” rather than “Sir” (an option, I would argue, that allows girls to gain the honor that accompanies knighthood without surrendering their feminine identity). One day, I observed approximately ten children (and one or two teens, plus a dad) lined up in the church’s center aisle, each one stepping forward to be knighted or princessed, as they so chose. As each participant kneeled and received his or her title, the responsibilities of that title were enumerated for them by the Queen: Knights must embark on the occasional quest, slay dragons, and rescue damsels, while princesses must smile, look pretty, wave, and “spend lots of daddy’s money” (field notes Sept. 12, 2008). Tellingly, no “Dames” were christened on this day.

Clearly, the messages regarding gender conveyed by the iconic figures of the Queen and the knight at each of these two festivals are complex. First, as previously indicated, the power (pretended or not) that accompanies the Queen’s position places every performance occurring on the festival grounds under her royal scrutiny, whether she is in attendance at the performance or not. Even considering the implicit generic frame story of Michigan’s festival, the entirety of the festival can be considered as subject to the Queen’s authority and created with her pleasure as its
topmost priority. Because of this relationship, it can be assumed that the values expressed—
including those surrounding gender— by festival performances reflect those of the Queen and therefore of the festival’s culture overall. Even more, “The Queen is the voice of God on earth” (field notes Sept. 6, 2008), according to Dame Catherine, reminding us of the fact that by Renaissance standards, the monarch was able to confer not only bureaucratic approval of those values, but also divine sanction for them.

The Queens at both festivals did not simply accept the values expressed by their performing subjects, but also offered their own commentary on appropriate gender behavior through oversight of the Joust (Michigan), interactions with visitors during the knighting ceremony (Ohio), and the audience with the Queen (Michigan). The Joust’s complex gender messages are not, however, simply the result of the Queen’s actions. We must consider the knights’ behavior in conjunction with that of the Queen and in light of the Queen’s power in order to begin unpacking the gender implications for the festival’s most popular event.

The Queen says little during the Joust (and as mentioned, at the Ohio festival, the Queen is absent), but her presence at the performance in Michigan clearly signals the Joust’s significance, as the Queen attends few other performances throughout the festival day. When the Queen does speak during the Joust, it is to approve of the actions about to take place on the field or advise the combatants (and, by extension, the spectators) about appropriate behavior or expectations. For example, during one particular performance, the Queen advised Sir Eric that he should “use the weapons of war, not words” (field notes Sept. 6, 2008), according to chivalric code. This statement is a prime example of the complex gender identity that accompanies a female monarch: while physical aggression is considered a traditionally unfeminine response, for a country’s sovereign, bodily combat is expected as a traditionally masculine display of power.
The Queen’s advocacy of weapons over words supports the perceived traditionally masculine method of conflict resolution for knights, thereby also making it clear that this method is the appropriate standard for masculine behavior. In other words, the Queen’s advice to Sir Eric is her advice to all men in the shire who desire to be as masculine as the Queen’s revered knights.

Queen Elizabeth Glorianna’s intermittent statements at the Joust, however, are not always used to uphold traditional gender expectations. The Queen’s support of Sir Morgan’s participation in the Joust distinctly runs counter to widely-accepted traditional gender standards. It’s no secret that women would have been barred from knighthood during Elizabeth’s reign, and would therefore have also been unable to take part in the Joust or Tournament. Furthermore, Elizabeth’s contention that “anything a man can do, so can a woman” would likely have not been shared by the peers or subjects of the sixteenth-century Elizabeth, and may even find itself on shaky footing with some of the subjects of the contemporary “performed” Queen Elizabeth Glorianna. Like a true Queen, however, Michigan’s Elizabeth delivered the statement with the intensity and force of a royal proclamation, allowing no room for dissention or argument. Furthermore, the Queen’s permissiveness regarding subversion of feminine gender expectations was also evident in her actions during the Audience with the Queen, where the masculine dress of one female guest and the “inappropriate” bow by both she and another were permitted without comment.

While Queen Elizabeth Glorianna demonstrated support for upending at least some of the traditional gender expectations for women, Queen Elizabeth I’s brief performance during the Knighting Ceremony seemed to reify traditional notions of gender, encouraging her newly-created knights to feats of bravery and honor while advising her nascent princesses to be nice, pretty, and spoiled. In other words, boys should do; girls should be. The only avenue by which
Elizabeth I might diffuse some of these essentialist notions is through her offering the title of “Dame” for the girls present at the ceremony. This title, although historically used to also identify the wife of a knight or baronet, is used at the Ohio Festival’s knighting ceremony only to confer the equivalent rank of a knighthood on a woman. As previously stated, however, none of the girls attending the ceremony during my observation requested this title. While it would be easy and perhaps even correct to attribute this to the influence of the ideal of American girlhood, the girls’ choices may also have been influenced by simple familiarity: children know what a princess is, but I would argue that few of them have any concept of what a Dame is. If this ceremony had occurred at the Michigan Festival, however, I can’t help but wonder if, after being exposed to Dame Catherine’s performance, the status of being a Dame would have both been more familiar and had greater appeal to young girls.

Despite apparently differing notions of femininity for their subjects, both of the Queens themselves performed in traditionally feminine ways. Their physical presentations, by all appearances, met or exceeded traditional standards of conduct and display, with each of the women attired in full skirts and stiff bodices constructed from lush fabrics accented by rich jewelry and regal crowns, and each possessed a soft, friendly, attractive face framed by clean, beautifully-styled hair. These Queens properly performed femininity: they were not unfriendly, unattractive, or inappropriately-dressed women who were pushing gender boundaries by violating traditional feminine gender norms. Neither Queen, despite any indications that she might be open to or even champion the subversion of traditional feminine standards of behavior (admittedly more evident in Elizabeth Glorianna’s actions than Elizabeth I’s), demonstrated interest in pushing those boundaries personally (likely due to the notion that their power is not
specifically masculine, but rather royal). In other words, while the Queens did not require it of other women, they chose to properly perform their gender.

While Elizabeth Glorianna’s public actions may have endorsed the subversion of feminine ideals, both she and Elizabeth I did not voice similar support for transgressive male behaviors. Elizabeth I’s expectations for masculine conduct were made clear in her comments at the Knighting Ceremony, and although Elizabeth Glorianna did not make as plain a statement as the Ohio Queen, her oversight, acceptance, enjoyment, and approval of the events of the Joust and tournament imply acceptance of the masculinity portrayed and espoused by the competing knights.

![Fig. 10: A knight at the Michigan Renaissance Festival](image)

The display of masculine attributes undertaken by the knights at both festivals is fairly consistent and arguably stereotypical. Participating knights are richly attired in garb befitting
their privileged rank but also bear the trappings of battle and physical combat. Swords, maces, shields, lances, armor, and helmets often comprise the gear worn by the combatants, and their ruggedness is evidenced by their often wild and unkempt hair and facial hair (with the obvious exception of Sir Morgan). These knights are full of confidence in their own skills and in their own masculinity, boasting their certain victory in the event and belittling the supposed (masculine) deficiencies of their adversaries. They seem to prefer drinking, pissing, and kissing to the civilized contests of skill, but their acute sense of honor restrains their baser instincts and requires their dedication to the chivalric code. These men are loyal to their sovereign, seeking her permission and obeying her command throughout the event. These men are also brave, fierce, fearless, strong, cunning, and determined in battle, while at the same time demonstrating a reverence for the gentle, beautiful ladies of the court and audience (or at least their segment of it): they perform masculinity appropriately.
It may certainly be argued that the Michigan knights’ acceptance of Sir Morgan indicates a breach in this masculine typology, but the knights must accept her according to their duty to the Queen, who has supported Sir Morgan’s claim to her position. Acceptance of Morgan, then, does not dilute the masculinity of the knights; it reinforces it by way of loyalty to their sovereign. Furthermore, Sir Morgan can be read as buttressing the standards by which masculine performance is measured, as she is allowed no adjustments for her sex: she dresses the same as the other knights, brags as loudly, insults as pointedly, uses the same weapons, rides a horse just as they must, and is expected to battle just as fiercely as her male opponents. There are no modifications made to excuse Sir Morgan from her duty to fulfill the obligations of masculine behavior. (Her trouble doing so is meant to go unnoticed by the audience and is therefore not part of the intent of her performance. In addition, some of the male knights were less adept than others at the contests of skill, the joust, and hand-to-hand combat.)

After considering the events at each festival that include the iconic figures of the Queen and the knight, what we are left with are performances that have differing messages for the subversion of traditional performances of femininity versus masculinity, especially in the case of the Michigan Renaissance Faire. While Ohio’s Elizabeth I generally upholds traditional gender roles for both sexes, Michigan’s Queen Elizabeth Glorianna made clear her support of gender role reversals for women. While she chose to perform her own femininity according to traditional models, she did not enforce traditional feminine gender expectations with either her guests or Sir Morgan. On the other hand, Michigan’s Queen promoted an essentialized and traditional notion of masculinity through her approval of the most masculine event of the festival, the Joust.
While masculinity may have seemed to dominate the Joust, it is important to remember that the event itself is, in the fictive world of the festival, set up not for the pleasure of the knights, but for that of the Queen. Although in reality the selection of performing acts is conducted by a festival’s administrative staff, the narrative of the festival world suggests that the performances have been selected by the shire officials in order to please and honor the Queen. In essence, then, it is the Queen who really holds the highest (fictive) power over the selection of entertainment: although she exerts her power indirectly, her approval is the standard by which performances are selected.

In the end, it seems that the festival just might be “a woman’s world.” Ruled by a woman, devised for the pleasure of a woman, and with what so far seems to be greater permission for women to experiment with and subvert traditional gender roles (at least in Michigan), the worlds
of these Renaissance festivals offer freedom and pleasure for their female visitors that may very well surpass the festival’s same offerings for men. At this point, let’s deepen and widen the conversation by looking at the performances of Tartanic and the Washing Well Wenches to explore whether or not these initial conclusions hold true across the festival. First, let’s look at the “manly men” of the pipe and drum group Tartanic.
CHAPTER 2:
“MEN WITHOUT PANTS:” KILTS, CAR WASHES, AND MASCULINITY IN THE PERFORMANCES OF TARTANIC

As proposed at the close of the previous chapter, the Renaissance festivals featured in my study can arguably be considered “feminine” spaces, as they ostensibly exist for the pleasure of and under the power of the Queen. Because this feminine power extends over the entire festival and all that occurs within it, not only the Joust but any performance—especially those that feature all-male casts—must, at some point, be considered in this light. But we’re not quite there, yet. As previously discussed, acts are in reality chosen by the festival for a variety of reasons, but the approval festival staff keeps in mind when evaluating performances is not that of the actress who plays the Queen but of the visitors. The success of any selection, then, must be measured primarily by audience response; in the case of the all-male pipe and drum ensemble Tartanic, evidence points toward success, indeed. Not only were the group’s performances at the Michigan Festival extremely well-attended, but spectators eagerly interacted with the performers, responded heartily to their humor, demonstrated appreciation for their talents, and purchased the band’s CDs. Furthermore, a review of the group’s touring schedule shows them to be a feature of not only the Michigan Renaissance Festival but also other faires, festivals, and highland games (as of May 25, 2009, the group had upcoming gigs at the St. Andrews Society of Detroit’s Highland Games in Livonia, Michigan and the Texas Renaissance Festival in Plantersville, Texas [myspace.com/tartanic]). Ultimately, I don’t think it would be going too far to call Tartanic a “crowd favorite.”

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore what Tartanic is communicating to the crowds that consistently gather for its shows by looking at the group’s performances over several
weekends. Specifically, I closely examine key aspects and key moments of those performances and ask, “What gender message(s) is Tartanic communicating? To whom are they communicating this message? And, ultimately, when the numerous elements and moments of performance are brought together, who is this performance for and what does it say to them regarding received notions of gender?”

Within the parameters of my own Renfest experience, Tartanic’s performance is unique. Calling themselves a “high-voltage bagpipe show” (field notes Sept. 7, 2008), the musicians that comprise Tartanic offer a more contemporary take on the traditional pipe and drum performance. Whereas common conceptions of bagpipe bands are often limited to the formal groups seen in parades and populated generally by older men, the members of Tartanic, while retaining the tradition of kilt-wearing, are for the most part young, handsome, and a little wild. The Ohio Renaissance Festival did not present a pipe band in 2008, traditional or otherwise, and my recollection of several years’ attendance (as a non-scholarly visitor) at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Festival does not include such a performance, either. For me, Tartanic instead evokes a favorite performance from the Pennsylvania Renaissance Festival called “The Duo of Woo.” Also clad in kilts, the Duo—comprised of either the characters Connor and Angus or Connor and Duncan McManly during the years I visited—used their humor and self-deprecation to woo women chosen from the audience, but the show included very little for men to identify with, as I believe Tartanic’s show does. The majority of other all-male performances I observed at both the Michigan and Ohio Renaissance Faires focused more on traditional music, juggling and stunts, odd talents, bad humor, and mud. They tended toward the silly (often delightfully so), dangerous, or soothing, with few performers relying on gender roles for a significant portion of
their show. Tartanic is therefore different from not only traditional (non-faire) pipe and drum corps but also from other faire performance groups.

Ironically, the first time I came across a performance of Tartanic’s, I watched them for a few minutes and decided that they weren’t worthy of extended critical observation. While I enjoy bagpipe music, I had in mind the aforementioned stereotype of stuffy pipe bands and concluded that a few guys blowing into a sack weren’t going to have anything to say about gender. Luckily, a gregarious festival-goer, intrigued by my note-taking at a performance by “Christophe the Insultor,” struck up a conversation with me and, upon learning more about my study, insisted that I must see Tartanic, enthusiastically informing me that their show even included a “car wash.” I had no idea at the time what a “car wash” was, but I followed her advice and eventually attended a show. I quickly learned that I had been incredibly wrong in my first estimation: this group of energetic young men playing pipes and drums were indeed saying something significant about gender in their performance.

The show upon which most of my study will focus is Tartanic’s final performance of the day, at 6:00 p.m. As I learned over the course of several visits, performers at the Michigan Renaissance Festival sometimes use the last performance of the day to offer a “PG-13” or “Mature” version of the show they perform throughout the earlier part of the day. (There are also performers who offer PG-13 shows at all times throughout the day, such as Ded Bob and Christophe the Insultor). These “PG-13” and “Mature” versions of shows often involve humor that is bawdier than that included in the performers’ daytime shows, at times even coming close to vulgarity. The vocal quartet Bocca’s late-day show, for example, featured jokes about “hot beavers,” dildos, and cunnilingus, as well numerous bawdy toasts; one of them, for example, delivered by a female, went as follows: “To boobs! Because you can’t ‘motorboat’ a
personality!” (field notes Sept. 7, 2008). Tartanic’s late show was billed by the group as “the sex o’clock show,” with the group announcing to their daytime audiences that it was a “clothing-optional performance” (field notes Sept. 27, 2008). At the evening show itself, Adrian, the group spokesman and crowd interaction guru, reminded the audience that “clothing-optional” applied to them as well. (At the performance I attended, however, I believe all audience members remained fully clothed.)

The basic premise of Tartanic’s show is bagpipes, drums, hot guys, kilts, and humor, with a bit of edgy piping thrown in for good measure. The group’s website declares, “TARTANIC is a band on the edge that fills a much needed niche in Celtic music performance, taking tunes out of the session and into the sensational with their own brand of humor and theatrics. This is not just music…this is an interactive spectacle brought to you by…MEN WITHOUT PANTS!!!” (tartanic.net). The “men without pants” I observed performing at the Michigan Renaissance Festival included Adrian Walter (band contact, drummer, dancer, front man), David Macejka (“tuppan, doumbek, percussion and coolness” [myspace.com/tartanic]), Mike McNutt (Highland bagpipes, Scottish smallpipes), Andrew Beck (Highland bagpipes), and Brian Dodge (Great Highland bagpipes). (Members of the group not at the Michigan Faire include Jay Kruse, Eric Boyd, Doug MacCrae, and Lyric Todkill [tartanic.net]).

The performances I attended consisted of four members of the group, with Mike and either Andrew or Brian playing bagpipes, Shawn playing drum, and Adrian alternately playing a variety of percussion instruments and working the crowd. All four members wear kilts, and for the daytime shows three of them also wear loose-fitting period shirts while Adrian wears a black leather vest with no shirt underneath. The roughly 45-minute show features plenty of traditional-sounding piping—very good piping, in my layman’s opinion—and also includes an occasional
bagpipe version of such classic heavy metal songs as Black Sabbath’s “Ironman” and “War Pigs” as well as Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It.” As the pipers play, Adrian works the crowd, at one point bringing a large drum into the audience and asking a male visitor to hold it while he stands on a nearby (and often at least partially occupied) audience bench and energetically plays it.

![Fig. 13: Adrian playing drum in the audience](image)

As the band members perform, one or two females clad in middle eastern-inspired, navel-bearing costumes undulate up and down the aisles, selling Tartanic CDs (offering, I would suggest, a touch of visual pleasure for male audience members). Between each musical number, Adrian and the group offer numerous jokes, banter, and stories, a little dancing (Adrian does a bit of step-dancing) and occasionally a brief balancing act on one of the tall, slender drums. The late-day performance also includes a lap dance given by the bare-chested and black-bow-tie clad Adrian and the aforementioned “car wash,” which will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter.
As previously mentioned, Tartanic’s performances were all well-attended, regardless of factors such as time of day, weather, or competing events. The seats were always nearly full at the start of each performance and by the end, standing audience members ringed the entire seating area as well. The group did not have a “home stage,” but their movement from one location to another within the festival day did not seem to impact their attendance.

An analysis of the way gender operates in Tartanic’s performance must begin with a consideration of factors that essentially pre-exist the group’s performance. As discussed in the previous chapter, all of the events that occur in Holly Grove (the name of the Michigan Festival’s shire) do so under the royal gaze of Queen Elizabeth Glorianna, even when she is not physically present. While this setup includes Tartanic’s performance, granting it the royal—and feminine—seal of approval before it even begins, it is also interesting to consider how that same approval reflects back onto perceptions of the Queen. While Elizabeth remained dignified during the Joust, her tacit approval of this shirtless, bawdy, sexually-charged display may open up
speculation that beneath her regal drapery and dignified demeanor beats the heart of a lusty wench. On the other hand, Tartanic’s ribald performance could be seen as something of a friendly joke on the demure Queen, something to make her blush and titter much the way an elderly woman might when complimented by a handsome young man. Without direct evidence for either narrative and with the freedom granted by the carnivalesque qualities of the festival, patrons can construct the Queen in either of these ways, or in an entirely different fashion altogether. While certainty regarding the Queen’s reaction would undoubtedly give us something to chew on in terms of gender, at present we can only state with confidence that the Queen’s approval of Tartanic’s performance has the potential to tell us something about not only masculinity, but femininity as well.

Another key factor in reading Tartanic’s performance through a gendered lens is the attire and physical presentation the performers have chosen to “brand” their group. As mentioned previously, all members of the group wear kilts for all performances, and the kilt figures prominently in how Tartanic markets itself. It’s important then to examine cultural attitudes toward the kilt in order to consider the meaning it may bring to Tartanic’s performance.

The kilt, rather than being seen as feminizing by way of its skirt-like qualities, has “come to signify a natural and unmistakable masculinity” (metmuseum.org), claims Andrew Bolton of The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute. Of course, the kilt is also—and perhaps primarily—a symbol of Scottish heritage and/or identity. It is worth noting that historically speaking, the kilt was not a Scottish product nor was it present during the Middle Ages or Renaissance. According to Hugh Trevor-Roper, “[w]hereas tartan […] was known in Scotland in the sixteenth century[…], the philibeg [kilt]—name and thing—is unknown before the eighteenth century” (19). Furthermore, Trevor-Roper argues, the kilt, “[s]o far from being a traditional
Highland dress, [...] was invented by an Englishman after the Union of 1707; and the differentiated ‘clan tartans’ are an even later invention” (Trevor-Roper 19). Popular imagination and romantic notions are seldom slaves to historical accuracy, however, and the kilt’s connection with Scottish heritage remains strong. In fact, scholar Caitlin Fry argues that it is precisely this connection that may endow the kilt with its masculine energy. She cites C.M. Munroe’s theory that such power stems from the kilt’s ability to “[connect] the wearer with constructions of the Scottish Highlander, who embodies aspects of [traditional] masculinity: toughness, stoicism, courage and embracing [sic] a life outdoors” (Fry 8). Reinforcing this perception, she suggests, is “the mythology of the Highland threat to British law and order, reinforced by Romantic retellings” (Fry 8). Fry further argues that the activities in which men traditionally participate while wearing kilts contributes to their masculine association: “Men wear the kilt at the football [match], when out to attract a partner, when getting married, [and] while playing the loud and powerful bagpipes” (8).

Bolton agrees, claiming that this image of masculinity has been reinforced in the arena of sport, most obviously through the Highland Games, now broadcast around the world. In events such as putting the shot, tossing the caber, and throwing the weight, they [sic] show men of obvious stamina competing in kilts. Most recently, however, the Highlander as a beau-ideal has been promoted by Scottish football supporters. Their tribal antics and kilted uniform received widespread publicity in France during the World Cup in the summer of 1998. Through such images, the kilt has come to represent a ready

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7 The pages of this online document are unnumbered, but Adobe Reader creates virtual page numbers for the PDF. The Adobe-generated virtual page numbers are therefore the ones used in all citations of this document.
access to Highland male sexuality. For non-Scotsmen, it provides the means of asserting a self-consciously yet unambiguously masculine persona.

Bolton’s comments here serve to bolster both traditional and contemporary concepts of the kilt: its presence at both the Highland Games and football matches associate it with hundreds of years of the iconically masculine world of sports.

Late twentieth-century films such as Rob Roy (1995) and Braveheart (1995) have also contributed significantly to masculine conceptions of the kilt. As Bolton explains, “[i]n the tradition of the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, these films portray the Highlander as ‘warrior hero,’ embodying timeless, masculine values.” Fry concurs, citing Munro’s analysis of the way in which Braveheart constructs honorable, noble, kilted Scottish men as “the heterosexual stereotypes of the rugged, outdoor man” (Fry 9, citing Munroe 34) and the scheming, distinctly non-kilt-wearing Englishmen as “either effeminate or immoral in their sexual dalliances” (Fry 9, citing Munroe 34). In other words, these films infer that it is not white that the good guys always wear, but kilts.

The internet is ripe with evidence that modern-day kilt-wearers are eager to invoke its masculine character. Kiltmen.com introduces viewers to the “Bravehearts,” a group that describes themselves as “an international band of men who enjoy the freedom, comfort, pleasure, and masculine appearance of kilts or other male unbifurcated (skirt-like) garments” and asks, “Are you man enough to join us?”(kiltmen.com). Real Men Wear Kilts (realmenwearkilts.net) offers articles, merchandise, and artwork featuring brawny, hyper-masculine men—in kilts, of course—as well as the “What’s Under…” page. This section of the web site offers snappy comebacks for and dozens of jokes about the (apparently) often-asked question, “What do you wear under your kilt?” The page also includes what appears to be a press clipping which states
that “[t]he vast majority of Scotsmen still choose to wear nothing beneath their kilts, according to a survey out today” (Harriet Arkell, *Evening Standard*, as presented on realmenwearkilts.net).

While the choice of what to wear (or not wear) underneath one’s kilt may for some be a wholly personal decision based on a variety of factors, kilt expert J. Charles Thompson claims that if nothing else, soldierly standards have something to say on the matter: “[a] highland soldier in the kilt is out of uniform if he wears anything under[neath] except when dancing, taking part in Highland games, or participating as a bandsman” (Thompson 97).

For Tartanic, “going regimental,” as it is called in Renaissance Faire circles (referring to the practice of wearing no undergarments beneath the kilt), forms the basis for many of the show’s jokes, stunts, and gimmicks. Even at the ostensibly family-friendly mid-day show, the lure of what was (or wasn’t) under Adrian’s kilt was played upon in an impossible-to-ignore moment: when standing on an audience bench and talking to the crowd, Adrian reached his hand back to apparently scratch his behind, taking the hem of his kilt with his hand and exposing his right thigh and buttock. It was a titillating moment for the audience, clearly meant to communicate that he was indeed wearing nothing underneath his kilt (whether that was true or not).

The band members constantly tease the audience with what is or isn’t underneath (usually) Adrian’s kilt: when he is knocked down during a piece of physical comedy, Shawn accuses the audience of trying to look up his kilt; and at one particular show, a cell phone was put under Adrian’s skirt so that pictures could be taken and sent to an audience member’s friend. Despite the band’s one-time claim of abiding by the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule concerning what is under their kilts, they continually refer to and joke about just that. When one audience member
called out “Freebird!” between music numbers, without missing a beat Shawn replied, “The free bird is under our kilt!” (field notes Sept. 7, 2008).

![Image of Tartanic members performing]

**Fig. 15:** Members of Tartanic (L-R) Mike McNutt, Brian Dodge, and Adrian Walter at the “sex o’clock show,” Michigan Renaissance Festival.

The most significant play on the contents of the band members’ kilts, however, comes when someone—in one case, another band member; in another, an audience member—is actually given the opportunity to look up one of the band members’ kilts from between the wearer’s legs. The first of these scenarios occurs when, after a slow-motion “fight” between Adrian and other band members, Adrian is knocked to the ground, apparently unconscious. As he lays there, one of the other band members (during my visit, both Andrew and Brian performed this bit, each at different shows), decides to go through Adrian’s sporran to see if there is anything worth stealing. (The sporran is a small purse-like pouch that hangs from the waist, roughly centered on the groin area. This action is much like rifling through a dead man’s pockets.) Andrew/Brian approaches Adrian from above his head, so that he stops just over
Adrian’s face, leans over to examine the contents of the sporran, and, when Adrian regains consciousness, gives him an unobstructed view right up Andrew/Brian’s kilt. Adrian’s reaction consists of shielding his eyes, shouting “ugh!” and “ew!” and letting Andrew/Brian know that he “need[s] some manscaping!” (field notes Sept. 7, 2008).

I would argue that Adrian’s reaction of revulsion here is precisely in line with what is expected of a heterosexual male in this situation and therefore works to show that the members of Tartanic are consummately heterosexual males, with no male-male desire going on to muddy the representation. Furthermore, this moment, when placed up against a similar one involving a female (i.e., the car wash, which is described in the next paragraph) reinscribes traditional definitions of gender, differentiating between normative female and normative male desire. In other words, while the male heterosexual contract requires men to react negatively at the sight of male genitalia, females are expected to react with at worst embarrassment, and at best, desire.

The pinnacle of the late show and of the under-kilt allure is indeed the “car wash,” a piece originated by the band members and performed exclusively at the late show (at least at the Michigan Festival; it is often excluded at other events) (Walter). Before the bit begins, Adrian reminds the audience that although Tartanic is famous for Scottish lap dances and “the car wash,” “because this is still a family show, you will see nothing—but if you are one of the lucky few—you see everything!” Influenced by festival “kilt inspectors” and the song “The Scotsman,” the car wash grew out of Tartanic’s shows’ frequent under-kilt jokes and the aforementioned lap dance bit (Walter). In order to perform the car wash, a female volunteer is selected from the audience and led to the stage, where she lies down on her back on a bench. As the pipers play, three of the band members (Adrian, Mike, and on the day I observed, Brian) take turns straddling the bench that the female audience member is lying on, walking from one end to the other, their
kilts swishing over her from head to knees rather like the brushes of a car wash move over a car as it passes through. Adrian, clearly the most flirtatious of the group, goes last, stopping for a few extra hip gyrations over the woman’s face before moving along her body. It’s all in good fun and afterward the woman is helped up from the bench and given hugs by the “car washers”; on the day I observed, the woman even reached back and gave Adrian’s derriere a squeeze while receiving her hug. Whether or not the woman was able to see anything underneath those kilts is, for all intents and purposes, immaterial (although perhaps not for the volunteer!). What matters for the audience is the allure and the mystery of what is underneath those kilts, and for the woman, the chance to be privileged enough to find out.

Fig. 16: The Tartanic “car wash”

Here again the festival space’s carnivalesque nature is evident, permitting an act that might be inappropriate or even illegal in the outside world and holding it up as not only entertaining for both sexes but also desirable for women. By entering the space of the festival and the Tartanic performances, therefore, visitors have tacitly signed a contract that suspends the
outside laws and liabilities that would normally apply to a man in a kilt straddling a woman’s face. Furthermore, the freedom that characterizes and sense of play that permeates the space (via carnival), may even change a female spectator who would in the outside world be offended by such an activity into a woman who willingly participates in and encourages it and considers herself lucky to be able to do so (and releases her from liability of sexual misconduct if she grabs the butt of a male performer).

The mystery of what is—or isn’t—worn underneath the kilt may also contribute to the virility the garment seems to confer on its wearer. Despite “being safely wrapped in nearly three metres of tartan,” claims Fry, the kilt-wearer’s genitals have the potential to be quickly and easily exposed. In other words, “the kilt provides […] ‘ready access to Highland masculine sexuality, and so to passion’ […]; unbridled virility available at the flick of a hem” (Fry 10, quoting Chapman 20). It is clear that Tartanic is trading upon the kilt and the mystery that comes with it for a significant part of the appeal of their show; even their name plays on the tartan pattern associated with kilt fabrics. As Thompson argues, “[w]hatever the facts may be, you must never admit you are wearing pants under the kilt. This is part of the mystique” (98). For this study, however, it is not only important to examine the kilt as a symbol of masculine power and sexuality, but to ask, for whom is that power and sexuality on display?

One possible reading of the masculinity symbolized by the kilt is as a direct appeal to male audience members, an embodiment of rugged manliness that makes male viewers of the show—especially those also wearing kilts—identify with this rogue band of “manly men.” On the other hand, the sexual allure of the kilt, in the primarily heteronormative world of the festival, is for female audience members, demonstrated most clearly by the “car wash.” I would argue that in Tartanic’s performances, the kilt serves as gender currency for both males and
females, and from a marketing standpoint, is likely what makes the group such a draw at the faire.

The kilt and all that comes with it reinforce a masculine ideal (as described in the preceding pages) that appeals to heterosexual male audience members, who either want to be or feel they are masculine “like Tartanic,” while at the same time appealing to female heterosexual audience members, who want to have these men or want the men they have in their lives to be like them. As Michael Kimmel argues, “[i]f manhood [is to] be proved, it [must] be proved in the eyes of other men” (141); men, he argues, evaluate their masculinity against that of others (and vice versa). As Tartanic’s performance continually reinforces and enacts traditional notions of masculine behavior, the group constructs itself as a standard of masculinity (for the festival and perhaps, in some ways, outside it). The men in the audience consequently note the group’s performance of masculinity and judge themselves against it, either reaffirming their own sense of manliness (if their actions match up) or desiring to be more like Tartanic (if they don’t).

While I agree with Kimmel’s assertion that men must prove their masculinity in the eyes of other men, I would also suggest that feminine approval plays a part in Tartanic’s appeal here. While masculinity and desirability are not always linked, I think it’s fair to claim that they often are, at least within heterosexual interactions. In Tartanic’s case, the group establishes itself as masculine as well as desirable by performing actions that elicit whoops and cheers from the female audience members (and, remember, sanctioning by the Queen) and provoke reactions like the one seen just after the conclusion of the car wash. Male audience members may, again, hold themselves up against Tartanic’s evident desirability, ending in either confirmation of their own appeal or a longing for that of Tartanic.
For female audience members, their approval of Tartanic may be influenced by that of the Queen, whose tacit endorsement may operate subliminally to cue and permit the women to enjoy the performance. The sensual celebration of carnival, too, allows women to become subjects that desire, with Tartanic’s members eagerly placing themselves as the objects. Female spectators, then, are presented with handsome, masculine, energetic men who are performing with their pleasure in mind, who seek out interaction with them (both through encounters in the audience and the car wash), and who treat them “like ladies” (offering a hand as volunteers come onstage and addressing them as “my lady”). Much like the men might have done in evaluating their own masculinity and desirability against that of Tartanic’s, the women in the audience may evaluate their current or future partner against the standard set by the group, resulting in confirmation of a good thing or a desire for change.

![Fig. 17: Adrian hamming it up for the camera](image)

Those who would be inclined to argue that Tartanic’s performance is a celebration of more traditional masculine gender expectations have a fair amount of evidence to support that
claim. The band members clearly cultivate a masculine look, even beyond the kilt. Facial hair is common—Shawn sports a full, Grizzly Adams-type beard, Mike wears a more manicured but still full beard, and Adrian has a short-cropped goatee—and the colors of the band’s clothing tend toward traditionally masculine colors—black, blue, brown, etc. The playing of the bagpipes, too, is a primarily male pursuit (Walter); according to Walter, “most people don’t expect [to see] a female piper.” Use those pipes to play heavy metal anthems—as Tartanic does—and their masculine appeal increases even more. Finally, as further evidence of the band’s edginess and metal influence, when band members remove their shirts for the late-day show, we see that Mike’s nipples are pierced.

At the same time, Tartanic’s performance of masculinity does not necessarily indicate that the show is for men, as the band’s actions throughout seem to have a female audience member in mind. I would argue that the jokes about penis size and premature ejaculation that pepper the performance are predicated on heteronormative ideas about what women want (i.e., men with large penises who have sexual stamina) and are therefore geared toward the amusement of the women present (but may inadvertently titillate gay audience members). Beyond their humor, the group (primarily Adrian) seeks out more interaction with female audience members than male ones; for example, Adrian’s time in the crowd more than once included a seductive dance with a female audience member. When Adrian spins onstage so his kilt lifts, when he poses for a photo while lifting his kilt, and when band members remove their shirts for the “sex o’clock show,” they are, at least within the premise of the performance, not doing so in order to engage male audience members, but to titillate and please female audience members (although multiple readings of moments like this are certainly possible). As Carrigan et al argue, “[i]t is […] a fundamental element of modern hegemonic masculinity that one sex

8 See Walser, “Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender.”
(women) exists as a potential sexual object, while the other sex (men) is negated as a sexual object” (109). The members of Tartanic reverse the traditional gendered sex roles of object and subject, and they do so voluntarily.

A deeper look at the subject/object function in Tartanic’s performance, however, exposes further possibilities. The voluntary nature of the band members’ objectification, for example, differentiates it from female sexual objectification, which feminist theory argues is made compulsory by patriarchal cultures (see Eisenstein, Gerhard, Hartsock, McElroy, Schacht). Furthermore, this voluntary surrender of the sexual gaze, rather than rendering the men powerless, allows them to essentially control the sexual response of the woman with their performance. In other words, signs of attraction, titillation, or sexual desire from the women for whom the men perform and with whom they interact may result in not only feelings of pleasure and excitement for the men, but also feelings of power. The idea that the men may have “turned on” a woman places sexual control right back in the masculine court. But let us not stop there; if we go just one step further, we again encounter the Queen. If we read Tartanic’s performance not as a device of the male performers but an entertainment provided by the Queen for the enjoyment of her female subjects, the power then seems to be transferred back to the feminine.

Walter acknowledged to me in a telephone interview the appeal Tartanic’s performance has for women. While he rightly believes that the show’s appeal is not exclusively for females, he admits, “I think we get more women screaming” (Walter). The gregarious Walter also joked that, yes, the group has moments where they seem to toy with becoming something of a “Scottish Chippendales” (note Adrian’s bow tie in Figure 18), but that Tartanic is not as sexual as such groups; while Tartanic’s performance may include bawdy jokes, some bare chests, and maybe even an exposed thigh, no one in the audience expects to see male genitalia. This distinction may
seem obvious and therefore not worth noting, but I believe this factor is crucial for understanding how masculine and feminine appeal can work together. It furthermore sheds light on an unusual event that occurred during the September 27 late show: a male was selected for the lap dance.

Walter informed me that this was a first for Tartanic; they had never chosen a male for this portion of the show before. If, as I have argued so far, Tartanic’s performance is representative of traditional (heteronormative) masculinity, how can this moment be explained?

I suggest that two factors allow for this moment in Tartanic’s performance, the first of which is, again, the carnivalesque nature of the festival itself. Equally as important, however, is the fact that aside from this moment, the rest of Tartanic’s performance is decidedly heteronormative. By constructing their performance in this manner, this moment of homosocial play is seen as clearly carnivalesque—a suspension of the “real” rather than the “real” itself. I contend that this dynamic was also in play when, during a performance at another event (at which I was not present), two heterosexual college-aged men, dressed in street clothes (rather than Renfest garb) participated (by lying down and being “washed”) in the car wash, at the urging of their friends (Walter). Furthermore, I can’t help but wonder if moments like this increase the group’s appeal to females in that they help “soften” traditional masculinity, making it less threatening to women.

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9 It’s important to make clear here that Tartanic’s members are not homophobic and in fact have had many gay audience members, even posing for photos with gay male audience members after shows (Walter). At the same time, however, my interview with Walter did not give me the impression that band members create bits specifically with gay audience members in mind.
Tartanic itself recognizes the masculine aura of the kilt. Walter acknowledged the effect of films like *Braveheart* and agreed that “the archetype of the male Scotsman in a kilt is one of power” (Walter). At the same time, however, Walter doesn’t see Tartanic as supporting notions of traditional masculinity. He indicated that he believes his character and body type do not fit the traditional masculine norm, and he has faced accusations of being too effeminate due to his theatrical background. He compared Tartanic with another contemporary pipe band seen at Renaissance festivals called The Rogues, who Walter describes as much more traditionally masculine. Tartanic, he argues, rather than performing the overt and intense aggression that can often accompany traditional notions of masculine behavior, is more interested in frivolity (play, anyone?) and humor. In fact, Walter claims, more traditionally masculine bits—such as a mid-show “football huddle”—have been part of the show in the past but have faded out over time.
Walter makes a good point; the members of Tartanic certainly do not perform the same type of masculinity as the physically and verbally aggressive knights. I would argue that they don’t have to; their kilts invoke the kind of rugged manliness that includes those traits and renders a performance of them unnecessary. I furthermore maintain that the arguably “tempered” masculinity performed by Tartanic, while perhaps atypical, still falls squarely with in the boundaries of traditional masculinity: there was nothing feminine about the gender performed by the band members. Instead, it seems that Tartanic’s masculinity focuses on having a sense of humor about itself which, like the homosocial play of the lap dance, simply renders Tartanic’s kilted masculinity less threatening to its audiences.

Taken in conjunction with the masculine and sexual appeal of the kilt, the factors discussed above make it possible to argue that Tartanic’s performance, while embodying a number of traditional masculine traits, is actually controlled by women; it has been conceived with the pleasure of the female viewer (royal or otherwise) as its top priority, and its achievement of that goal is the primary measurement of success for the show overall. In other words, if no females are eager enough to volunteer for the “car wash,” the show comes to a halt, and essentially flops.

In this contemporary age of “grrrl power,” it is perhaps fitting that my reading of the evidence thus far points toward an overriding feminine influence at the two festivals featured in this study. While traditional masculine expectations might seem to be privileged—both in Tartanic’s performance and the Joust—it may in fact be women who are the more important gender to please. Let’s turn the tables now and look at what happens with gender when the performers are not men, but women…and not just women, but wenches….
CHAPTER 3:
“GOOD CLEAN FUN…WET DIRTY WOMEN:” WENCHES, COMEDY, AND THE MALE SEX OBJECT AT THE WASH PIT

Whereas Tartanic’s performance offered an example of the performance of masculinity, the Washing Well Wenches provide an opportunity to examine a performance of “femininity,” with both hilarious and revealing results: their take on feminine standards of beauty and sexual appetite combined with their manipulation of male audience volunteers presents a considerable supply of material for my study. Furthermore, whereas Tartanic’s performance was fairly consistent in its use of symbols (such as the kilt) and in its messages regarding masculinity, the Washing Well Wenches’ performance includes several mini-performances that broadcast a variety of messages about femininity as well as masculinity.

In this chapter, I endeavor to examine the Washing Well Wenches’ show, highlighting performative moments that offer particularly intriguing commentary on gender roles. Specifically, I plan to address what the Wenches’ performance says about appropriate and desirable feminine and masculine behavior in the festival setting and how those messages can be read in light of dominant cultural ideas of gender behavior outside of the festival world. Furthermore, I will call on scholarship regarding female use of comedy to demonstrate how the Wenches’ position as comic initiators allows them access to a set of female stereotypes (which they then co-opt) and provides them agency that as women might otherwise be unavailable to them.

For the majority of this chapter, I will focus on the performance of the Washing Well Wenches at the Michigan Renaissance Festival during the fall of 2008. It is important to note, however, that the Washing Well Wenches are something of a “franchise” act: in the spring of
2009, their website listed a cast of eight Wenches who, in various combinations, perform at nearly twenty Renaissance faires across the United States over the course of each year. In the fall of 2008, the Wenches were at both the Michigan and Ohio Renaissance Festivals, with Wenches Oliv, Sophie, and Penelope performing at Ohio and Daphne and Winnie performing at Michigan. The Ohio show was a truncated version of the performance seen at the Michigan Festival, with no pre-show (a feature of the Michigan performance that I’ll be describing in the coming pages) and an alternate story sometimes enacted by the Wenches and an audience volunteer. Although it contained essentially the same elements otherwise, the Ohio show was shortened by including less improvisation, ad-libbing, and audience interaction. While for me the show felt rushed compared to the Michigan one, Ohio audiences nonetheless greatly enjoyed the performance. Because of these differences, therefore, I will in this chapter be focusing on the Michigan shows, which I believe offer more opportunities to explore the gender implications of the Wenches’ performance.

The Washing Well Wenches’ performance begins long before the Wenches even arrive. They occupy the only space on the Michigan Festival grounds dedicated solely to one performer or group, and also the only “personalized” space on the grounds. (At the Ohio Festival, the Wenches were one of approximately five acts that had a dedicated and/or personalized space, and theirs accommodated a much smaller audience than Michigan. The Ohio “Washer Well” Stage was located in the middle of an unshaded grassy area just inside the festival gates, and while the actual wash pit may have been the same size as Michigan’s, the overall feeling was of a much smaller playing area.) Every other performance space on the Michigan grounds is genericized so that any performer or group can occupy it and have their needs met, many groups hanging a sign or other marker to identify their performance. Even the jousting field does double
duty, serving as the space for not only the Joust and Tournament, but also for falconry
demonstrations. Where other stages are assigned nonspecific names like “Green Grove Stage”
and “The Crown Stage,” the Wenches’ stage is called “Washing Well Stage” (“Legend”), a clear
indication of to whom the stage “belongs.” In addition, the stage itself is decorated specifically to
invoke the performance of the Wenches: the back wall of the stage is covered in hung “laundry,”
including numerous pairs of bloomers and striped socks, and a large “wash pit” (a water-filled
cement basin about the size and depth of a small wading pool) constitutes much of the space in
front of that wall.

As perhaps the most significant piece of personalization in the space, the “wash pit”
arguably makes the space unviable for other performers. At The Mud Stage, another
performance space on the Michigan Festival grounds with a “compromised” playing area (i.e., a
mud pit), however, a modification has been created to allow use of the area by more than one
performance group. In this playing space, the festival has positioned an alternative stage at the back of the audience seating area. Because the seating consists of long, backless benches, the audience only has to seat themselves in the direction facing the appropriate stage in order for the needs of both mud-based and non-mud performance groups to be met. The presence of a small wooden stage at the back of the Washing Well Stage’s audience seating area clearly offered a similar alternative playing space, but it was not used; the performance area was designated for the Wenches only.

The sense of being in the Wenches’ space (rather than a generic one) is also maximized by the physical location of the Washing Well Stage. Situated in the rear corner of the grounds, farthest away from the entrance (but not far from a nearby beer stand), the Washing Well Stage is surrounded by trees, a handful of which have taken up residence in the midst of the audience seating area. A tall wooden plank fence seems to barely restrain the woods just beyond the stage, and the canopy created by the soaring branches of the trees both within and surrounding the audience and playing area creates a sense of near privacy. The Washing Well Stage is isolated from much of the rest of the festival, and it feels much like its own little world.

Audiences for the Wash Show always gather early. On one particular day, I arrived twenty minutes before the show was scheduled to begin, and there was not a seat left in the roughly (by my estimation) 300-person seating area. Two signs—created from bedsheets—grace the upstage walls of the performance area and prepare visitors for the show ahead. One reads, “If thou art still wearing thy clothing, we be not doing our jobs!” and the other, “Good Clean Fun…Wet Dirty Women” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008) While the performance does not ultimately become as scandalous as these two signs may suggest—after all, there is no nudity, no profanity or explicit language—the Wenches’ smart, fast-paced performance does include a great deal of
carnivalesque play, beginning with a pre-performance visit by the Wenches, Daphne and Winnie (played by Danielle Supon and Kerri Slavin).

Daphne, a curvaceous, freckled blond with a child-like face and Pippi Longstocking pigtails, is the “smarter” of the two. Clad in a navy dress with tight yellow bodice, she does not embody the ultra-thin ideal of womanhood currently championed by the world outside of the festival. Winnie, on the other hand, appears to be more slender, but wears a baggy pink blouse and skirt with a loose-fitting burgundy vest that conceal her shape. Winnie wears her blond hair in a spastic ponytail on top of her head with a cloth headband, topping off her look with a few blackened teeth. This slightly absurd and generally unattractive look is the signature of the Wenches, overall: a quick look at photos of the other Wenches included on the web site shows a bevy of crazy ponytails and blackened teeth (washingwellwenches.com).
The pre-show visit, which was not a part of the Ohio Festival’s Wench performance, begins with the enthusiastic arrival of Daphne and Winnie. The two greet their gathered audience members with excitement and offer to go on a “beer run” for those who are patiently awaiting the start of show, a proposition which (naturally) results in a great cheer from the audience. As Daphne tends to be the “leader” of the two for much of the performance, I’ll focus here on her actions, which are replicated by Winnie in another section of the audience. After announcing the beer run, Daphne visits audience members who indicate (by raised hands, by standing, etc.) their desire for a beer, taking cash and committing their drink order to memory. As she visits more and more patrons, she announces each order and tallies the items: “Another Guinness! So that’s one mead, two cider, and FOUR GUINNESS!” Daphne’s preferred beverage is indeed Guinness, and any order consisting of this particular brand of beer is greeted with excitement from her and cheers from the audience, as they know the order has pleased her.

Once all orders are taken, Daphne and Winnie leave the performance area and proceed house right, just up a small hill to the closest beer stand, while the audience waits. The Wenches return with handfuls or even trayfuls of beer-filled plastic cups, sometimes even carrying one in their mouths, and begin to hand the beverages out to those who had ordered them. This is where the chaos begins.

Daphne (and Winnie, in her section) begins to dole out the beverages, but not without incident. One of the most common “problems” Daphne faces when handing out the drinks is determining which ones are actually Guinness (an unlikely problem, as Guinness is a dark, frothy stout, and the other beers the Wenches bring back with them tend to be clear, yellowish liquids). Naturally, the only way for Daphne to find out for sure is to “taste” the beer in order to ensure that it is the correct kind. Daphne’s “tastes” often amount to guzzling half of the liquid in the
cup, resulting in later attempts to “even out” drinks by pouring from one cup into another. Throughout the rest of the “beer run” routine, Daphne and Winnie use a variety of tactics in order to drink more and more of the audience members’ beer, ultimately imbibing nearly half (by my estimation) of the Guinness ordered (the Wenches rarely, if ever, drink any of the other beverages). The Wenches’ froth-covered faces glance sheepishly at patrons as they hand half-full beers to their mostly male customers, but they are not so chagrined that they forget to take one last draught before letting go of the cup.

This portion of the show was different each time I attended a performance, as the Wenches seemed to constantly come up with new “excuses” to drink their beloved Guinness. During some performances, the Wenches used the Guinness to flirt with male audience members: for instance, after asking one if he wants a taste of her Guinness, Daphne especially is known to smear the beverage on her cheek or even her cleavage, resulting in the audience member licking the drink off of her, much to her seeming (and his) titillation and delight.

It’s important to note here that the relationship between the Wenches and the audience— despite the fact that patrons were watching their Guinness disappear before their very eyes—was never contentious. Patrons laughed, played along, and enjoyed the “tricks” that were being played on them, and one performance even featured a repeat patron who had arrived at the show with two Guinesses in hand as a gift for Daphne.

With the beverages finally distributed (a process that goes on for approximately thirty minutes, a significant portion of the show’s total playtime), the “official” portion of the show begins. The Wenches inform the audience that they are about to be educated on courtly love, the most important tenet of which states that if you love someone, you cannot get caught touching them openly in public (field notes Aug. 31, 2008). Unfortunately, the audience is informed, there
are violators of this very rule in their midst, and the Wenches identify a couple in the audience as the perpetrators. After a public “shaming” by the Wenches and audience, Winnie’s joke about “telling the man’s wife,” and the Wenches’ silly reenactment of what the couple was supposedly doing, the audience is asked if they believe this “naughty display of public affection should be brought to justice” (video 10), a question to which they predictably reply with a resounding “aye!” The Wenches then ask the female from the offending couple if they can borrow her man, to which no reply is really allowed before the Wenches encourage the audience to cheer for “their man,” who by now knows he is expected to join Winnie and Daphne onstage. The man is placed by Winnie and Daphne in the position of honor: “right up here in the wet spot,” as Winnie cheerfully (and provocatively) announces, indicating the portion of the wash pit’s rim—wet from some earlier business—that functions roughly as center stage.

As the man takes his place between Winnie and Daphne, Winnie is nearly overcome with excitement, laughing giddily as Daphne asks the woman who had been in the audience with the man to wave and identify herself. Once identified, the Wenches ask, “My lady, are you a jealous woman?” While her answer cannot be heard by most of the audience, the Wenches indicate it as “no” and express relief at getting the reply they had hoped for; Daphne proceeds to remind the woman that the conventions of courtly love indicate that “[i]f you love a man, you may not touch him the way you were touching him in public.” At this point Winnie chimes in and the Wenches, in unison, declare, “Well, we don’t love this man…” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008). As Winnie begins to snuggle up to the man, laying her head on his shoulder and rubbing his chest, the Wenches continue, “In fact, we don’t even KNOW this man…But we will soooon!” Daphne and Winnie each stretch out one of the man’s arms and begin kissing his hands, his arms, even

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10 Unless otherwise indicated, lines of dialogue are transcribed from videography conducted at the September 6 performance of the Washing Well Wenches.
his armpits, during which the audience erupts into laughter. The man generally seems a little shocked at this behavior, unprepared for the close physical contact, but allows it, usually laughing and perhaps feeling a little embarrassed. The Wenches declare that according to the ideals of courtly love, “we can touch him all we want to!” The man is then asked to stand with his hands behind his back as the Wenches sing a song that leads them through touching various parts of the man’s body, beginning with his toes and continuing to his knee and thigh. While the thigh touch evokes a series of jokes, the next verse moves onto the groin area, with the wenches making a “woo” sound instead of identifying a particular body part as they come just shy of actually touching the man (they actually touch the man’s toes, knee, and thigh). The verse stops as the women move their hands toward and away from the man’s groin again, repeating the “woo” sound, playing with the motion and the noise and displaying a sort of awe and desire for the area of the body in question. Finally, during the last verse, the Wenches tweak and play with the man’s nipples (through his shirt), eliciting numerous squeals and cackles from female audience members. The song then ends and the man is encouraged to take a bow. Amid the applause, he says farewell to Daphne and Winnie, usually offering a kiss on the hand or cheek; however, Winnie, instead of presenting her hand or check for the kiss, is fond of offering her calf instead (which was indeed kissed by the volunteer each time I saw her do so).
Fig: 21: Winnie and Daphne with volunteer during the “woo” verse of their song

The next section of the Washing Well Wenches’ show features three male audience members who have come forth in response to the Wenches’ invitation for men who would like to procure flowers for their ladies. Three or four men assemble on the ground downstage of the wash pit, while Daphne and Winnie stand behind them on the raised wash pit rim and ask the audience playfully, “Is anything ever free from a woman?” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008). The answer shouted by both the audience and Wenches is, of course, “No!” and the assembled men are informed that if they love their ladies but want the Wenches’ flowers, they must perform for the Wenches, a proclamation that elicits growls of pleasure from the pair and excites Winnie so much that she becomes “feral” and must be brought back to reality by Daphne.
The first task asked of the men is a shouting contest, where the men are asked to yell “as long and loud” as they can in order to determine the “best man.” The winner of this competition elicits the Wenches’ cheers of “Give it up for stamina!” but it is one of the non-winners (let’s call him Man #1) to whom the Wenches direct their attention next, because he is, as they declare, “such a little cutie.” As Winnie nibbles on Man #1’s face and neck, Daphne lays out the task they have for him: he must run up a small hill—the same one used by the Wenches to venture to the beer stand earlier—pausing near the top to beat his chest and shout as loud as he can, “I am an animal! I am a savage! Take me to the new world!” As the Wenches and audience chant “Go, go, go, go!” the man does as instructed, much to the amusement of the audience, and returns to the stage for his promised flower. The audience is instructed to help Man #1 claim his prize by chanting, “Teeth, teeth, teeth!” at which point Daphne places the flower’s stem sideways between her teeth and Man #1 uses his mouth to retrieve the flower, generally grasping the stem at a point which does not require contact with Daphne’s lips. Man #1 is then cheered by the audience and returns to his seat.

Fig. 22: Daphne licks the stem before placing it in her mouth
The other men vying for flowers are asked to and perform similar tasks, each receiving a flower for their effort in the way described above. The tasks required of these volunteers (during various performances) included:

1. Wearing a pink boa and running to the back of the audience, throwing one’s arms around oneself, and yelling, “I’m strong, I’m sensitive, and I just want to be held!” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008).

2. Running up to a man selected by the Wenches (a stranger to the contestant), hugging him, and yelling, “Daddy, Daddy, why did you leave me?” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008).

3. Running to a designated spot (either the hill or the back of the audience) with a large pair of white men’s briefs, putting the briefs on, and shouting, “In my man pants, I can do anything!” (field notes Sept. 27, 2008)

Fig. 23: A contestant in his “man pants”
A very special task was reserved for the final remaining participant, the winner of the yelling contest (i.e., the man who showed the most “stamina”). Daphne explains that Winnie is having a hard time finding a husband and that no one thinks she is very attractive. She then tells the final man, “You’re gonna fix that.” As Winnie grows more excited and animalistic, Daphne explains to the man that all he needs to do in order to make Winnie appear more attractive is “to chase her about, yelling at the top of [his] lungs, ‘Winnie, Winnie, I need you!’ ‘Winnie, Winnie I want you!’ ‘Winnie, I can’t live without you!’ ‘Winnie, you’re so beautiful!’” Winnie purrs with delight and informs the man that she will not stop running until “every single person in this entire festival can hear you shoutin’ my name.” After a romp around the audience, Winnie and her pursuer return to the stage, where Winnie grabs a flower to reward the volunteer and the audience begins chanting, as it did with the other contestants, “Teeth, teeth, teeth!” The affection-starved Winnie, however, does not play the flower bit in the same way as Daphne. As Winnie’s beau leans forward to take the flower from her teeth, she suddenly pulls back, breaks the flower’s stem so that it is shorter, and returns it to her mouth, inviting the man to retrieve the flower a second time. As they move toward each other, Winnie again stops, this time shortening the stem even more, and after the man’s third try at the flower finally eliminates the stem altogether, placing the flower itself inside her mouth and grinning lasciviously. Somehow the man retrieves the flower from Winnie with his mouth (the details of the transaction are not perceivable from the audience), and the audience cheers as Winnie is overcome with pleasure and joy. After Daphne advises the contestant that his (“real”) lady will not want the flower that has been in Winnie’s mouth, Winnie excitedly announces that she wants the deflowered flower. At each of the shows I attended, the contestant moved to return the flower to Winnie, resulting in the audiences’ chants of “Teeth, teeth, teeth!” again. The contestant often takes the audiences’
cue and playfully does to Winnie what she just did to him, placing the flower in his mouth and returning it to Winnie via a mouth-to-mouth transaction, after which he is presented with a more acceptable flower. The Wenches watch as he returns to his seat, and as he approaches the female companion for whom he earned the flower, they lead one last chant of “Teeth, teeth, teeth!” to which the couple acquiesces before the show moves on to its final section.

![Figs. 24-26: Winnie’s flower bit](image)

The final portion of the show begins with one last request for volunteers: “We need a man who is brave…We need a man who is strong…We need a man who is too stupid to run!” (field notes Aug. 31, 2008) the Wenches declare. Many hands in the audience go up in response, and Daphne and Winnie each choose a contestant. They seem to favor large, bald, muscular men for this particular volunteer effort, and two men are brought to the performance area, where they are fondled and placed on display so that the audience can decide which man the Wenches will use—“and ‘use,’” Winnie declares in a playfully lecherous manner, “is the appropriate term.” The Wenches announce another series of contests, the first one to find a man that “shows no fear.” The Wenches make “scary” faces at the two men, and when neither of them flinches, demand, “Marry me!” and proceed to lick and rub the bald heads of the contestant(s), encouraging the audience to “give it up for bravery!”
The second contest consists of having the men make a muscle—“not one you think with” admonishes Daphne—and encouraging the ladies in the audience to enjoy the display and cheer for the men. While Daphne’s man curls his arm and makes a muscle, she fondles his arm and asks “Who wants to see how long I can fondle him?” While Winnie’s raises his arms and shows off his muscles, she runs her hands up and down his sides, buries her face in his armpit, throws her arms around his neck, and declares, “Now that’s what I call a man!”

Daphne then calls for an additional demonstration of strength, instructing several audience members in the front row to stand and step to aside so that an entire audience seating bench is free to be used for her man’s “bench press.” The man lifts the wooden bench (likely not a terribly heavy bench) over his head, and the audience cheers. Winnie, not to be outdone, then informs the audience that her man can “WENCH press,” and proceeds to have her man pick her up under the back and knees (like a groom carries his bride across the threshold). The contestant usually does what amounts to a bicep curl with Winnie in his arms—although at least one contestant actually lifted Winnie above his head! After Winnie’s man finishes lifting her, he attempts to put Winnie down. Winnie, however, impressed with her man and enjoying the physical contact, “climbs” her man, using her arms to pull herself over his shoulder, and places a leg around his neck so that he can’t put her down.

*Figs. 27-28: Winnie being “wench pressed” by a contestant; Winnie “climbing” her man*
After Winnie is returned to her feet, Daphne, having touted her man’s roughness, toughness, and ability to inspire fear, informs the audience that her man is so masculine that everyone calls him “Bubba.” Winnie’s competitive spirit then rises again, and Winnie declares, “Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Well, my man is so secure with his masculinity that—Sir, don’t hold back, both arms up, baby, give ‘em a little wiggle.” Winnie’s man does as instructed, gyrating his hips, much to the audience’s amusement and delight. After this demonstration, Winnie continues, “My man is so secure with his masculinity that everybody calls him…VERONICA!” At this point the contest is put to a vote by applause and the audience invariably selects “Veronica” as the man to be used by the Wenches.

As “Bubba” returns to his seat, The Wenches discuss casting for the story they are about to enact, deciding (with the audience’s help) that “Veronica” is most appropriate not for the role of the hero or the pirate, but for the role of the gypsy dancer. Naturally, a “costume” is provided for Veronica, which consists of a rather ridiculous, stuffed, bra-like creation, which Veronica wears hanging around his neck. The effect created is of two large, pendulous breasts that dangle and sway uncontrollably as Veronica dances the obligatory gypsy dance to get the tale started, and the audience erupts with laughter. The Wenches’ story then unfolds, with Daphne taking on the role of the evil Spanish pirate.

It’s worth taking a moment here to revisit Prest’s and Keyser’s work, using their concepts to clearly define what is occurring in these slightly cross-dressed moments. I suggest that both Veronica and Daphne are engaging in a sort of drag—a parodic display of gender—rather than cross-dressing or passing. Drag, furthermore, using Keyser’s terminology, functions as a device—an element to be noticed rather than ignored—suggesting that the Wenches’ humor not only references but relies on upending traditional notions—and performances—of gender. In
other words, audiences must be familiar with traditional gender role expectations in order to recognize—and laugh at—the Wenches’ reversals of them.

The Wenches’ now-cast story follows the common “damsel in distress” formula, with Veronica the gypsy dancer being kidnapped by the evil Spanish pirate. Veronica must, of course, be saved by the hero, and the Wenches declare that the one man capable of saving her is…Bubba! Bubba returns to the stage and is supplied his costume: because “heroes always wear white hats,” a white bra is placed on Bubba’s head, much to the amusement of the audience. Inevitably, Bubba saves Veronica from the pirate, and Veronica and Bubba are directed by the Wenches to embrace. This moment is perhaps the only moment in the Wenches’ entire show where I noted any discomfort. Faced with the prospect of hugging another man, and a stranger at that, Veronica and Bubba often demonstrated a moment of hesitation before hugging each other, and the hug was often a quick, rather perfunctory, pat-on-the-back half-hug. Very little contact
was made between the two men’s bodies, and the men themselves laughed during the moment, aware of the awkwardness and discomfort and their demonstration of it. The Wench show concludes with a farewell from Daphne and Winnie to Bubba and Veronica, with the Wenches presenting their cheeks to the men for a final smooch. At the last minute, however, the Wenches turn their faces, tricking the men into giving them a kiss on the lips instead.

This description of the Wash Show is admittedly lengthy, but even so does little justice to the sheer number of instances of innuendo—both scripted and ad-libbed—contained in the Wenches’ performance. Hopefully, the detail provided shows how considerable a task it is to unpack this incredibly dense performance’s potential gender commentary. Before taking a focused look at specific moments and motifs contained in the Wenches’ performance, however, it’s necessary to consider the comic mode itself—clearly used throughout the entire performance by the Wenches—and how it may function when used by female performers, as it is in the Wash Show.

According to scholar Philip Auslander, traditional views of humor and comedy include “social prejudices against joke making as an aggressive and ‘unfeminine’ behavior” (316). Psychologist Paul McGhee concurs, claiming not only that “a clearly definable set of sex-role standards regarding humor exists for males and females in our culture” (183), but also that “[m]ost important along these lines is the expectation that males should be initiators of humor, while females should be responders” (183). Women who create humor, then, “violate the behavioral pattern normally reserved for women” (McGhee 184).

Auslander, too, argues that “women have been excluded from the comic tradition, except as the objects of male humor” (316), citing “literary critic Reginald Blythe’s 1959 definition of

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11 While the focus spanning 2008 and 2009 on the plagiarism controversy involving Auslander has somewhat colored his reputation of late, he still offers useful ideas for this exploration of women and the use of humor.
women as ‘the unlaughing at which men laugh’ […] as the epitome of this tradition” (316). While Auslander admits these statements may present an essentialist view of male humor, he rightly believes that there is nonetheless a significant degree of truth contained in them. Because “humor is inextricably linked to power and dominance” (317), Auslander contends, a traditionally patriarchal society’s (which the United States arguably is) comic permissions would be granted to its male constituents, not its female ones.  

While the current success of female stand-up comics such as Lisa Lampanelli and female comic writers such as Tina Fey (not to mention the past success of comedienes like Lucile Ball and Carol Burnett) offers evidence that women can succeed in comedic positions, the number of females who can claim the same level of success as these two women is certainly smaller than the number of men who can do the same. A visit to Comedy Central’s web site on March 8, 2009, for example, showcased five of the channel’s featured broadcasts, all of which featured male comedians or comic hosts. In fact, only two female comics’ names appeared in the considerable amount of text included on the network’s home page, and the only images of women included consisted of a small photo of Lisa Lampanelli behind comic Jeff Foxworthy and an unknown woman in a Vonage ad hat happened to occupy the banner space on that page (comedycentral.com). While Comedy Central’s web site is admittedly not the only—or even the primary—cultural yardstick for measuring comedic success, it does seem noteworthy that the web site of a network dedicated to comedy included so little on female comics.

Probing male domination of comedy further, Auslander supports comedy writer Anne Beatts’ contention that

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12 It’s important to note that Auslander essentially ignores the possibilities lesbian comics add to the mix of gender and power in comedy. For the purposes of my thesis, however—for which I have chosen to work within heteronormative ideology, leaving queer examinations for other scholars—Auslander’s work provides a compelling way to consider the Wenches’ use of the comic form.
men are afraid of allowing women the access to power represented by humor […] because a humorous woman threatens the central icon of the mythology that supports male dominance: ‘they unconsciously are afraid that the ultimate joke will be the size of their sexual apparatus’ (Beatts 28, in Auslander 317).

Indeed, the size of a man’s “sexual apparatus” is often joked about in numerous Renaissance festival performances (like Tartanic’s for example), and while the Wenches’ performance includes comparatively fewer of these jokes than many others, it does not eliminate this strain of humor entirely. Furthermore, argues Auslander, “[o]nce women start making jokes, men fear, nothing will be exempt from female comic derision, no matter how sacred to patriarchy” (317).

If we accept this male fear that comedy will unleash a sort of Pandora’s Box of female unruliness, it follows then that the use of “humor by women may be an effective weapon against male social dominance and phallocentrism” (Auslander 318). By holding the comic reins, women place themselves in positions of power and control (Korol, McGhee, Lavin), and are able to move themselves from the object of comedy (as occurs in traditional comedic forms) to the subject; they create the comedy rather than being insulted by it. Furthermore, female comics are able to progress from being the ones who laugh (at men’s jokes), to the ones who evoke laughter from others: as comedian Jerry Seinfeld insightfully remarked, “To laugh is to be dominated” (qt. in Borns 20).

Female appropriation of the traditionally male comic form, then, can be seen as a tactic through which women can claim a degree of agency otherwise denied to them. For the Washing Well Wenches and their performance of gender, use of the comedic genre can therefore be read as running counter to traditional forms of performance considered appropriate for women. In
other words, the Wenches can be read as performing against a traditional female role before any consideration of content is even begun.

With the agency that accompanies humor, however, come a variety of negative stereotypes that Suzanne Lavin claims have historically plagued female comics, including the “[a]lternate images of women as dumb, man-chasing, and/or physically unattractive [that] dominated women’s comedy from the ‘20’s to the late ‘50’s” (Lavin 10). Auslander, too, claims that most female comics, at some point in their careers, have come across men “who assume that [they are] presenting [themselves] as sexually available” (317). And Mahadev Apte observes that “in many cultures norms of modesty cause women who laugh freely and openly in public to be viewed as loose, sexually promiscuous, and lacking in self-discipline” (75). While the Wenches seem to reject these traditional views of female comics, I don’t believe this is actually the case—at least not entirely. I would not go so far as to argue that the actresses playing Winnie and Daphne are sexually available to their audience members, but the characters of Winnie and Daphne consistently demonstrate their sexual appetites and willingness. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, Daphne and Winnie are the sexual aggressors throughout the duration of their performance, continually touching, stroking, kissing, and fondling the male volunteers. The Wenches also occasionally make sexual gestures and act as sexual manipulators by use of tactics that ensure the male volunteers hold, kiss, or lick them. I suspect that if any of the male volunteers took Daphne and Winnie’s sexual desires literally and did something that crossed the line for the performers, their sexual availability would be exposed as artificial, but this did not happen during any of the performances I attended. Instead, the performed sexual appetites of the Wenches, combined again with the freedom of carnival, underlie and provide the humor for a considerable amount of the show.

13 Again, Auslander does not include lesbian comics who perform for lesbian and gay audiences in this equation.
Even at this initial level, the Wenches seem to be pushing with one hand while pulling with the other: they use the power dynamics of comedy to upturn traditional models of (male) dominance, while at the same time relying on traditional stereotypes of the female comic for much of the humor they create. By doing so, I argue that the Wenches diminish the “danger” posed by their comedic work, as their subversive power dynamic is neutralized by their sexual willingness. In the next few pages, therefore, I’ll explore whether the Washing Well Wenches continue the use of this push-and-pull strategy throughout their performance, or if subversion or reification wins out in the end.

The “beer run” that comprises the pre-show portion of the performance, for example, can be read as championing subversion over tradition. The bit begins with the Wenches performing an “appropriate” female role, that of the subservient woman. The Wenches offer to retrieve beverages for a primarily (often exclusively) male selection of customers, thereby contributing to the men’s ease, comfort, and enjoyment. This action can be said to be evocative of the traditional scenario of the bread-winning male who comes home from work, retires to his chair, and commands his wife to bring him a beer. However, while the Wenches start out in a position aligned with traditional female roles, once they return with the beers and begin serving them, that role is completely turned on its ear. Not only are the Wenches poor servers in that they can’t remember who ordered what, but they drink beer that is not theirs, essentially depriving the male of the full amount of his pleasure. Not only is beer a traditionally masculine beverage, the drinking of which can be read as unfeminine behavior, but the beer that Winnie and Daphne drink is the property of someone else—and a male someone else, at that. The Wenches use schemes, trickery, and even blatant disobedience in order to drink the men’s beer, a series of again decidedly unfeminine actions. Additionally, within this section of the performance, the
Wenches do little to nothing to neutralize their subversive behavior: the men are given half-cups of beer without refund or redress.

Interestingly, at none of the performances I attended did any of the beer-drinkers become obviously or overtly angry with the Wenches. To the contrary, most of those who requested beer seemed to enjoy being bamboozled, laughing and happily playing along without reservation. Non-participating audience members, too, enjoyed watching the Wenches’ antics, and I can’t help but wonder if there were women in the audience who, finding themselves in that traditional subservient female role in “real life,” received some vicarious personal satisfaction from the Wenches’ impertinence. I don’t think it would be too much of a stretch to say that in the traditional configuration of the subservient woman/dominant man that exists outside the festival space and in quotidian social settings, behavior such as that exhibited by Winnie and Daphne would not have met with laughter or pleasure. In fact, it would likely have met with censure or even punishment (for example, an actual female server who drinks half of her customers’ beers before finally serving them would, among other things, drive away the affected customers as well as those who witnessed her actions). However, in the carnivalesque and play-focused world of the Renaissance faire, this inversion is not only permitted but enjoyed.

The upending of traditional male-female roles continues in the first segment of the “formal” performance, where a couple is singled out as violating the conventions of courtly love, and the male member of the couple is called onstage to suffer the “punishment,” resulting in the first of several bits in the act that call upon traditional notions of sexual subjectivity (previously discussed in Chapter 2). In this first scenario of the Wash Show, the Wenches are clearly the sexual aggressors, and rather than being sexual objects governed by the male gaze, they place the man in the position of sexual object, where he is subject not only to the Wenches’ female gaze,
but to the gaze of the female audience members as well. The Wenches maintain complete control of the male volunteer, instructing him where and how to stand, and subjecting him to physical touch without his express permission. Ostensibly, no part of the man’s body is off-limits, and he has essentially no power to deny the Wenches permission to touch him as they so desire. Furthermore, the man exhibited in this segment is never asked his name; he is allowed no identity other than that of the objectified male. He is, for all intents and purposes, a prop. When examined in light of traditional notions of women as the property of men, with no right to safeguard their bodies from their husbands and fathers, the dynamic operating in this scene increases the complexity of gender role inversion already occurring in just this first portion of the show.

Finally, in this bit, the Wenches continue to upend gender expectations by advocating the traditionally male-identified desire for impersonal sexual relationships. Whereas women are generally believed to desire emotional commitment in order to engage in a sexual encounter, Winnie and Daphne manipulate the conventions of courtly love to privilege anonymity and to grant them physical and sexual access to the male volunteer.

In the second segment of the Washing Well Wenches’ performance, which features three to four male audience volunteers performing silly and perhaps embarrassing tasks in order to obtain a flower for their ladies, many of the same inversions seen in the first section continue. The male participants again are not asked their names, but serve more as manipulatable puppets than semi-inanimate props for Winnie and Daphne. Where the man in the first portion of the show was placed as an object to be touched, pointed at, and talked about, the men in this second bit are instructed to complete tasks demanded of them by the Wenches. The control dynamic here is compounded even further by the fact that these men came to the stage initially to get a
flower for their lady: the men are therefore acting for the pleasure and enjoyment of both their female companion in the audience and the Wenches on stage.

The stakes of the erotic manipulation of the men in the flower contest are also raised, as the men’s bodies are not only subject to touch without consent, but the men are also manipulated into near mouth-to-mouth contact with the Wenches, an action read as quite intimate when exhibited by two opposite-sex adults within a heteronormative culture. The final contestant, in fact, may actually end up engaging in such contact with Winnie, as the placement of the flower inside her mouth seems to permit no other method of extraction (while still following the “rules of exchange” set forth by Daphne’s actions during the earlier flower exchanges). The women continue to have control.

It’s important to remember, at this point, that Daphne and Winnie are decidedly not to be read as “attractive” women—Winnie is arguably the poster child for the sex-starved, unattractive woman—and their status as undesirable women further complicates their relationship to the men. I would argue that prevailing cultural belief holds that men better tolerate control by and humiliation for a beautiful woman; however, the men participating in the Wash Show are subjected to domination by black-toothed, crazy-haired, “desperate women.” The inversion is then theoretically doubled: the men are subject to women, and to unattractive women at that, multiplying the transgressiveness of this particular facet of the Wenches’ performance.

The final moment of this section of the show, however, may act to rein in some of the danger that has been unleashed during the scene. The final flower contestant, after engaging in what appears to be mouth-to-mouth contact with Winnie, returns to his seat and recreates the oral exchange of the flower with his female companion, usually completing the transaction with a kiss. The act of returning to “where he belongs,” repeating the action he demonstrated on stage
with Winnie, and offering his “real” female partner a “real” kiss serves to neutralize the
dangerous events that have just occurred onstage. This moment of return negates any ties to
Winnie, effectively releasing him from her control and firmly placing the events of the preceding
minutes to an “other” time that does not affect or alter the “real” world of the participants and
spectators.

While it seems that the significantly raised stakes of the second section of the show
necessitated a closing recuperative act, the third and final segment of the Washing Well
Wenches’ show is apparently so transgressive that it requires what may be seen as “preventative
measures” before proceeding on to what seems to be the “real” content of the scene.

The contests slated for the male participants soon to be known as “Bubba” and
“Veronica” (fictive—and even incongruous—identities that again deny the men personal
identity) can be read as demonstrations of ideal masculinity; the Wenches test the traditional
masculine attributes of bravery, strength, and toughness and prove each of the men to be
outstanding in these qualities. By constructing these two men as the embodiments of ideal
masculine traits—in this case utilizing physical demonstration by the men and constitutive
speech acts by the Wenches—the contestants’ male egos are not only boosted, but their
masculinity is certified and solidified, so that the events which follow are clearly read as
temporary and not evidence of an unstable gender identity.

Once “Veronica” is identified and cast as the gypsy dancer, however, gender roles are
brought to a state of inversion not heretofore seen in the Wenches’ show. The evil (male) pirate
is played by Daphne while the previously indentified ultra-masculine participant plays the
seductive (female) gypsy dancer, effectively questioning the stability of gender and highlighting
its performed nature. In the terms of this show, a man (pirate) is signaled by a moustache and
head scarf, and a woman (gypsy dancer) is identified by her conspicuous and undulating breasts. Furthermore, a man is identified by aggressive and dangerous action (kidnapping), while a woman is recognized by her sensual, gyrating hips and need to be rescued.

While Daphne’s adopted male identity generates some laughter from the crowd, it is Veronica’s gypsy dance and high-pitched cries for help that evoke the loudest laughs during this final section. The act of cementing Veronica’s masculinity just prior to his kidnapping magnifies the incongruity between the male body and the feminine identity. Daphne, on the other hand, has been assuming a “masculine” role for much of the show, directing the action, placing the men in object positions, serving as sexual aggressor, etc., so that the relative disjunction between her body and her gender identity is considerably less than that of Veronica.

Daphne and Winnie continue to exert narrative control throughout the remainder of the pirate tale, effectively directing the actions of both Bubba and Veronica, even when the men may find those actions embarrassing. However, the final moments of the show reveal just how close the Wenches come to the men’s boundaries when pushing the limits of “appropriate” gender behavior. The discomfort in evidence as Bubba and Veronica embrace seems to indicate that the men were willing to play with notions of masculinity and femininity, but that they draw the line at physically intimate interaction between men. In other words, even inverted heterosexuality is more comfortable than anything that hints at homosexuality. Therefore, the final act of the performance—the wily conversion of a “cheek kiss” to a “lip” one—while another example of physical manipulation by the Wenches, reinstates the heterosexual norm endangered by the male hug.

In the final tally, it is clear that the Washing Well Wench show offers a variety of gender inversions, subversions, and revisions. These are women who call the men in the show “sugar
lips,” who jostle Veronica’s pendulous stuffed breasts and call her a “bouncy wench,” and who kiss, stroke, grab, and fondle numerous parts of their male volunteers’ bodies without asking permission or making apology. Unlike the Queens in Chapter 1, the Wenches engage in the clear opposite of appropriate feminine behavior at nearly every turn—looking unattractive, drinking beer, serving badly, tricking men, having sexual appetites, and objectifying men (although again, the Queen’s tacit approval of all that occurs on the grounds sanctions the Wenches’ behavior).

The women here are in power and the men are subject not only to their gaze but to their command. At the same time, however, the Wenches’ performance of utterly inappropriate femininity is funny—something recognized as outside of the norm and worth laughing at—and in this way can be seen as further constituting traditional gender norms, rather than subverting them.

Of course, it’s not all as sinister as my descriptions may make it sound. The male volunteers clearly demonstrate their enjoyment at participating with laughter, smiles, and sincere affection for the Wenches when they leave the stage. It might also be argued that in this carnivalesque space, when the men consent to come onto the stage, they also consent to whatever happens while they are up there (although audience members new to the show, unlike those who have seen the Wenches before, wouldn’t really know what they are getting into). Nonetheless, despite the lack of permission and control the men have regarding access to their bodies, it’s clear that they never feel they are in true physical danger. Whether it’s the presence of the audience or the carnivalesque conditions of the festival, the participants understand that they are engaging in play. These men can enjoy the freedom provided by the festival, even when it seemingly places them in positions of powerlessness, because the events of the Renaissance festival are not “real;” when they leave the festival space, their lives will be subject to the rules
of gender that they have always known, and that place them back in a position of relative control and power.

Before concluding this examination of the Washing Well Wenches’ performance, it’s important to ask, “For Whom is this performance? Who constitutes the Wenches’ ‘ideal audience’?” The obvious answer may seem to be that the Wenches’ show was created for heterosexual women: the display and objectification of the male body, the silly and embarrassing tasks undertaken by the male contestants, and the placement of these men firmly in the hands of female control strongly signal the performance’s construction for the pleasure of a straight, female viewer. At the September 6 performance, for example, the Wenches laughingly noted that the female member of the couple that had violated the rules of courtly love was taking pictures of her man’s interaction with the Wenches. I would argue, however, that the Wenches’ performance and the humor contained in it go beyond the invocation of pleasure for the female viewer; it creates what Auslander calls a “strategic community,” that is, “a moment at which a shared subjectivity that excludes men is created under [their] very noses, […] placing the men in the audience in the position women have traditionally occupied as comedy spectators” (321). In other words, the Wenches use the male participants to generate humor that appeals to the female spectator, and that humor in turn provides the added benefit of empowering the women in the audience and fostering a sense of female *communitas* (Turner).

Excluding the men from the picture, however, may oversimplify the matter; the men in the audience clearly enjoy the performance, as well. While the male volunteers must suffer embarrassment at the hands of women and the improper performance of femininity by those same women, their sexual objectification is, as with the members of Tartanic, essentially voluntary. The sexual power dynamic, then, is perhaps more complex than it appears. As the
Wenches place the men at the center of female attention—both theirs and the audience’s—broadcasting their masculine qualities and hinting at their sexual prowess, they arguably stroke the men’s egos and give the men exactly what they want: confirmation that they are indeed the pinnacles of manhood. At the same time, the men in the audience, while they may have to suffer the loss of their Guinness and a few jokes at their expense, also have the luxury of evaluating their masculinity from their seats in the audience. Recalling Kimmel’s argument from the Tartanic chapter, audience members for the Wash Show are able to measure their masculine traits against the men being manipulated by the Wenches, perhaps feeling superior enough to the poor dupes onstage to laugh at them rather than be threatened by them. Whatever the reason, it’s clear that both male and female spectators enjoy the Wenches’ performance. Like Tartanic’s show, the Wash Show may be geared more towards the pleasure of a female viewer, but it must not be seen as doing so to the exclusion of its male spectators.
CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis, I posed a handful of questions about how gender operates within the Renaissance festival space, including whether gender norms are subverted, reinscribed, or reinvented and whether there seems to be a dominant gendered quality to the space. While the performances examined here cannot be considered representative of all the performances that occur at every U.S. Renfest, many of those festivals include versions of the performances examined here. Most festivals feature a Joust and many are ruled by a Queen, and the busy schedules of both Tartanic and the Washing Well Wenches testify to their presence at numerous festivals. So while Renfest performance and ideology cannot be reduced to just these performances, they also must not be dismissed as anomalous or insignificant.

If we look first at the ways in which masculinity is performed by the groups and individuals I featured in this thesis, we see an abundance of traditional, heterosexual masculine performance. The active, combative, aggressive knights typify perceived notions of traditional masculinity, even when one of those knights is female. The members of Tartanic, too, by way of association with the kilt, invoke traditional masculinity. While Highlanders and knights are admittedly male icons that prevail outside of the usual, contemporary perceived categories of masculinity in the U.S., the way their gender is played within the Renfest world puts them squarely into a normative category within that space; there are no performative arguments for a different kind of manhood at the festival.

At the same time, each of these masculine performances seems to be conducted with heterosexual feminine pleasure in mind. I’ve shown the way in which the Queen’s approval is granted, both directly and indirectly, for these performances and have suggested that, in her
absence, female audience members may act as her surrogates. The involvement of female
audience members in more direct ways, however (being offered a flower, participating in the car
wash), allows us to consider the ways in which these performances appeal intrasticially, that is,
both to the festival’s feminine sensibility as established by the Queen and to that which female
audience members bring with them from their quotidian lives. Even more, Tartanic’s voluntary
sexual objectification opens up a multilayered discourse on sexual power that allows for a
multiplicity of conclusions, including ones that place feminine sexual subjectivity on top.

Feminine performance, on the other hand, appears to be more varied. While each of the
Queens performed her femininity in a highly traditional fashion, only Elizabeth I asked the same
of female visitors; Elizabeth Glorianna not only permitted (at her Audience) but encouraged (at
the Joust) inappropriate feminine behavior. The Washing Well Wenches, on the other hand,
performed a highly inappropriate and inverted femininity (and both supported and subverted
traditional notions of masculinity), but ultimately diffused (although I would not say erased) the
danger of unruly women. Each of these performances, I argue, can be seen as appealing to
modern feminist notions of equality (in bows, activities like the joust, and sexual aggression),
underscored by the festival’s intrasticiancy and carnivalesque nature.

So what does this all mean? What difference does it make if these festivals are indeed
feminine spaces? The significance of the festival as such a space lies in how its character opens
up the possibility for spectators to think about gender in new ways, even as it ultimately supports
and reconstitutes the status quo. I’m certainly not arguing that visitors leave the festival with
completely new ideas about gender; the evidence to support that claim could only be gathered
through a study of visitors conducted outside of and after the festival experience, a task outside
the scope and purview of my thesis. I would suggest that even in the absence of that evidence,
however, it would be a stretch to argue that individuals’ beliefs are somehow drastically changed by the festival. But people are clearly thinking about gender (whether consciously or not) in the performances featured in this thesis, as evidenced by their laughter, if nothing else: if they aren’t thinking about gender, they don’t get many of the jokes that comprise these performances. “Veronica” wouldn’t be funny and the Ohio knight’s comment about bearded women would fall flat if the audience wasn’t thinking about the way men and women are “supposed” to look and behave. Furthermore, if we reconsider the nature of carnival and the importance of play for “rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives” (Bial 135), spectators who are thinking about gender performance, whether consciously or subconsciously, have the potential to experience subtle shifts in belief and perhaps even future behavior.

In the end, it is perhaps true that Renaissance festivals don’t really change the world, but it seems that they may, in fact, release us from it in a way that allows us to examine—and play with—the ways in which our “sedimented” notions of gender are constructed through performance.
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