

**At Play, to the Full:
On the Subject Performed in Gender Passing
(the Case of Mark Twain's *Is He Dead?* and
Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*)**

Enikő Bollobás

In this paper I would like to discuss a particular set of performative subjectivities, the subject produced in gender passing. Passing is a term originally used in the context of race, but has been recently extended to cover other forms of boundary crossings. As a general term, it involves various, often multiple transgressions between the binary oppositions of man/woman, white/black, or heterosexual/homosexual. Gender passing comes about predominantly through the dramatic or theatrical replaying of existing social scripts, uncovering the purely imitative and constructed nature of gender by ignoring, transforming, or literally re-dressing the “biological.” In other words, these are performances where the binaries of feminine/masculine leave the body marked as their “natural” site and become staged or acted out. In such instances of passing, gender is visibly constructed in a catachrestic manner, lacking both a literal referent where ontologies might be located and an “original” which might be copied and cited.

Dislodged from the body, gender will be seen as constructed through institutions and discourses; foregrounded as both product and process, passing will reveal itself as series of performance acts of oscillation and transgression between boundaries, categories, and subjectivities. As an instance of transgression, gender passing often appears as a threat: it threatens the order believed to have been solid; it threatens identity categories thought to have been securely planted in our bodies; threatens positions of domination and hegemony, with all their

rights and privileges, which are now “usurped,” as Lynn Friedli puts it (qtd. in Ginsberg 13), by the passer.

As much as one might agree with Juda Bennett in seeing the term *passing* “inelegant” (36), its original meaning—coming from the slip of paper that, preventing slaves from being taken for fugitives, granted free movement to them (36)—can be transferred to the realm of gender too. As such, by gender passing I will mean that elaborate performance through which the “passing figure” will be allowed free movement as the person produced in this performance. By opposing power relations, the passer will violate the norms of subjection and critique discursive boundaries; by what Gayatri Spivak calls “enabling violation” in the post-colonial context (*Spivak Reader* 19), the passer will be self-constructed as a subject with agency.

1. Gender passing: full passing and play passing (gender play)

Gender passing, just like its constituent term *gender*, exhibits a strong asymmetry: instead of referring equally to passing in either direction, it highlights the marked elements—“gender” as an attribute of woman—as its target configuration. In other words, in the transparent meaning of gender passing, womanhood—as the marked element of the man/woman binary—will be the predominant identity inflection targeted. This is so in spite of the fact that asymmetrical power relations would privilege the reverse—as they do in the case of race passing, where the predominant direction of passing is from the disempowered black position to the more powerful white position. In my reading there is a very important reason for this gender asymmetry: while man’s is the obvious, unmarked/unseen, and transparent position, woman’s is palpable, marked/seen, and opaque (to continue the transparency/opacity metaphor). She is the one who “has” gender, whose gender is more obviously “made,” its constructedness visible and legible, therefore the technologies available for its imitative construction in passing are more prevalent.

Moreover, the transgression of the woman who passes as a man is more serious: she will be a usurper of male privilege indeed, a female Prometheus who steals the fire—this time not from Zeus but man in general. The woman transgressor seems to commit a grave crime when she dissociates masculinity—which, as Judith Halberstam explains, is still the property of the white male heterosexual (2)—from the male body. In

this case, part of woman's crime, I would add, is that masculinity's appropriation by the female body makes a most subversive claim unambiguously: that masculinity is as much of a construction as femininity. Gender passing from female to male, in other words, will undo the marked/unmarked distinction by foregrounding the constructedness of the "unmarked universal" subject, and will also undo unmarked as dominant and invisible equation (see Lisa Walker 14). Female masculinity is obviously one such instance when masculinity leaves the male body: this is masculinity in women which appears as the ultimate transgression; this is the appropriation not only of gender but also of power, as well as of unmarked transparency. (Masculinity's wider reassignment to the female body is a rather recent phenomenon only, part of "postmodern cool," as Susan Bordo points out [Male Body 41]). In spite of the many examples of cross-dressing, female-to-male transsexuals, thirdness, or cross-identifying women (which Halberstam cites throughout *Female Masculinity*), this female masculinity has not found its entry in literature to the degree a man's passing for a woman has. I too will discuss the mechanism of gender passing through examples only where womanhood is being performed.

Gender passing is a most complex phenomenon. I will differentiate between two kinds of passing from the perspective of binaries, both revealing, in Butler's words, "gender itself to be an imitation" (*Psychic* 145). Both are, moreover, parodies "of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (*Gender Trouble* 31), since what they copy are technologies and not "essences." Of the two kinds, the first refers to the replacement of one pole for the other in the system of binaries; this is the case when a man "passes over" for a woman. This type, which I will call *full passing*, is always the staging of existing normative identities. The other kind, which I call *play passing*, or *gender play*, is the interrogation and subversion of the binary system; as such, these instances can be seen as the performative creations of new ontologies. It is much like mimicry, to adopt the meaning of Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry: of wanting to be "almost the same, but not quite" (86). While full passing aims to deceive (to be altogether "the same"), gender play seems to purposefully reveal its own transgression by constantly producing its own slippage. While the first is a deadly serious game, where the stakes are high indeed, in the second playfulness is a key factor.

I will start with full passing. By openly deploying imitative-mimetic processes taken from the "other" in the binary, this performance foregrounds the theatrical basis of gender and race, and gives a high

visibility to playful repetition or mime—to be reenacted by a person of the “opposite” gender or race. As a narrative which “assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self,” as Halberstam puts it, full passing will limit gender or race identification by allowing movement between the binaries of man and woman or black and white only. This binary understanding of passing—when the passer can only step from one category into the “opposite” other—involves the either/or logic of power relations. Concomitantly, there is often a moral element involved: the passer is considered a trespasser, while passing is seen as deception, “an attempt to claim status and privilege falsely” (Ginsberg 8). This element of deception, as well as the claiming of privilege falsely, is present even in instances where the passer masquerades as belonging to the subordinated group: when a man passes as a woman. In these instances, however, as I will show, the male passer assumes only more power (in the legal, sexual, or political arena) by masquerading as woman.

But, as I mentioned above, this is only one kind of passing, from one pole to the other. There exists that other kind too, play passing or mimicry, where the passer refuses the logic of dichotomous thinking and assumes both gender and race to be hybrid categories, occupying a continuum rather than opposite poles. So, together with the insistence of passing as “almost the same, but not quite” comes a multiplication of categories for constructions between the two poles. It is playful approximation and in-betweenness, as well as the opening of the field for new, transitional categories.

Confounding the logic of binary thinking, gender play will allow for new possibilities of gender configurations to come about by showing that all identities are constructed, acted out, through a series of normative performances (when woman performs femininity, for example). Once femininity leaves the body of the woman, what was purportedly the “essential” site naturalized for its performance, gender ceases to be a binary category: not conforming to the two poles of the binary, gender will be constructed at variable or random points of the continuum, making for multiple and contingent gender categories (depending, for example, on the imbrications of other identity categories such as race, class, sexuality, nationality). Moreover, gender play will contribute to the fundamental destabilization of the categories themselves, creating a “category crisis” defined by Marjorie Garber as “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another” (16)

Let me give some examples. George Harris's Spanish masquerade and Eliza Harris's cross-dressing in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* satisfy all the specifications of full passing: they aim at deception, wanting to fully enact the "other" race and gender, and make some alterations on their bodies. George's full passing is proclaimed a "dangerous game" (123), one of life and death, where he not only dresses up as a Spanish gentleman but changes his skin and hair color too:

"I am pretty well disguised, I fancy," said the young man, with a smile.
"little walnut bark has made my yellow skin a genteel brown, and I've dyed my hair black; so you see I don't answer to the advertisement at all." (123)

Similarly, when, in another deadly serious game, Eliza dresses up as a man before crossing Lake Erie, she adapts "her slender and pretty form the articles of man's attire," cuts her "black curly hair" (410), and is learning to take long steps in an effort to "try to look saucy" (412). No slippage is allowed in either case; otherwise they would be caught and returned to their owners. Historically, cross-dresser women in the Civil War, of whom there were probably around four hundred, according to Elizabeth Young (184), made every attempt to perform full passing. One of the better-known passers, Loretta Velasquez/Lt. Harry Buford went as far as "combining gender masquerade with heterosexual seduction" (Young 192). But, to take an example of gender play, George Sand sports a masculine look by wearing pants and smoking cigars without wanting to pass fully as a man; hers is a performance that meant to reveal its slippage. The effort to not fully hide but highlight this playful slippage from a linguistic-orthographic perspective is there even in the name *George*, spelled purposefully differently from the French way, without an *s*. If much of passing is about visibility—or "specularity," as Ginsberg claims (2)—then this kind of gender play is much about making the slippage visible too.

Wholly constructed in processes that challenge biology, gender passing provides a serious argument against gender essentialism. Of course, both full passing and gender play relate to biology in certain ways: the first attempts at some alterations of the body, "biology" (like skin or hair), while the second applies changes on the body, but usually not to the body. But not even do the alterations performed on the body in full passing involve radical sex changes as in the case of transgendered/transsexed bodies, for example. We could say that sex is

made irrelevant in both forms of gender passing; it is through gendering institutions and practices only that gender performance is conducted. All gender traits will be produced by gendering institutions, discourses, practices, and performances independent of whether man performs womanhood (in the Mark Twain text), or, in the case of the as yet “unsexed” child’s performance, a woman comes about without regard to biology (in the Nabokov text).

Gender passing, finally, usually does not occur within one category only, but involves other inflections of identity too, like race and sexuality. Since identities are not made up of single inflections but are formed of complex imbrications of such inflections, the passing figure will most often be seen as passing along more than one axis. Therefore, gender passing will involve, more often than not, additional forms of passing, between white/black, straight/gay, genuine/fake, original/copy, subject/object, for example.

I turn now to my two texts informed by gender passing.

2. Full passing: (cross-)dressing and constructing the body:

Mark Twain, *Is He Dead?*

Mark Twain’s late comedy *Is He Dead?* was thought to have been lost for over a hundred years. Written in Vienna in 1898, it was published in 2003 only, just in time perhaps to offer another supporting argument for theories on the performative construction of the subject.

The play was inspired by the fate of what was considered the most famous painting of the time, *The Angelus* of Jean-François Millet, the object of an “intense bidding war” between France and America (see Fishkin 159), to sell finally for the amazing price of 550,000 francs. The issue problematized in the play concerns the fact that while artists are unable to sell their paintings during their lives, heirs and art dealers make fortunes on these same paintings after the death of the artists. The Millet in Twain’s play cannot sell a single painting, not even the one recognized as a masterpiece by all, *The Angelus*, and not for the meager sum of 275 or even one hundred francs. Bound by a contract to the villain of the play, the art dealer Bastien André, who wants to ruin the painter, Millet and his pupils decide to stage the master’s death. Giving him three “last months” to enjoy his creative frenzy and to introduce Millet’s heir, his “twin sister” “Widow Daisy Tillou” (played by the cross-dressing Millet of

course), they first spread the news of his imminent death, then start selling his paintings. Some of the same buyers appear, now happy to pay 80,000 francs for pieces they refused to buy for a hundred earlier. The art dealer also reappears, insisting that he owns the pictures (the same which he considered invaluable before) by contract. Having to attend his own funeral, Millet/Widow Tillou now must find a way to get rid of the art dealer, who wants to marry the widow in exchange for burning the contract. The painter passing as his own twin sister takes a desperate step and performs a peculiar Swiftian undressing ceremony for André, who thinks he is unnoticed in the room, as she removes her wig, glass-eye, false teeth, and even wooden legs. Having successfully disposed of André, Millet reveals the whole theatrics to his grieving fiancée, together with the new plan that he will reenter art life under the name of Placide Duval, a “marvelously successful imitator of the late lamented” (128)—and the whole victorious gang rejoices to the simultaneous sound of the *Marseillaise*, *Yankee Doodle*, *God Save the Queen*, and *Die Wacht am Rhein*.

Three circumstances are relevant from the perspective of my argument: Millet’s passing as a woman, the foregrounding of “her” constructed body, and the plan to reintroduce Millet as his own imitator. Of course, these incidents are not without parallel in Twain’s works. Male cross-dressing appears in several Twain texts, among them *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, fitting well into his larger fascination with doubles and duplicities. Throughout his career Twain was intrigued by mistaken identities and the dilemma, described by Susan Gillman, as “whether one can tell people apart, differentiate among them” (5). Clemens, who took the rather revealing pseudonym *Twain*, was fascinated by masks, twins, double personalities, look-alikes, impersonators, as well as impostures: “the pose of a pose, the fake of a fake” (Gillman 6). He liked to amuse his audience with what he called “double jokes,” those that “aimed at deceiving the listener but at making him pleurably conscious of his own deception” (Gillman 21). The idea of the constructed body also appears in some other pieces, such as “Aurelia’s Unfortunate Young Man,” *Roughing It*, and “The Lowest Animal” (see Fishkin 181). Moreover, the man who only wore his famous white suit in his seventies was not only eccentric but transgressive too: “why not adopt some of the women’s styles?” he asked, justifying his “Dress Reform” by linking it to gender roles (qtd. in Gillman 186).

So, to return to my first point, the Widow's cross-dressing performance is a convincing full passing to the degree that even Millet's fiancée is deceived. This is so in spite of the fact that it is difficult for him to "endure these awkward clothes" (63) and that he appears smoking a pipe (62). Moreover, since the Widow is unable to present a coherent story of her own life, she must be seen as having a "touched" mind (86), as being "eccentric" and "a little crazed by this great sorrow" (82). Not only does she give a fantastic account of having "slathers" of children (88), "seven in two years" (89), of having not just sons and daughters but a "considerable variety" (91) of children, from a "whole colony" of husbands (89), but—and this is her most severe transgression—she uses very unladylike language, telling André, for example, that he is "a mean, cowardly, contemptible, base-gotten damned scoundrel" (99). All these forms of slippage should give away the mimicry. But not even does Millet's fiancée see through the performance, although she does find the Widow "queer" (115). But no slippage is noticed, because, as Twain seems to suggest, people will believe what they want to believe. As Millet claims at the end (ironically about France only), "[w]hen France has committed herself to the expression of a belief, she will die a hundred thousand deaths rather than confess she has been in the wrong" (143).

Millet's passing, however, involves more than gender: he also transgresses object/subject categories, or, in this case categories of agency. Instead of allowing André to act as his agent art dealer, Millet and his friends decide to claim agency in a very particular way, by making himself into his own agent, even if he needs to pass as a dead man for that.

Second, it is the constructed body *par excellence* which is being reenacted during the performance which the Widow puts on in order to scare away the art dealer. This performance seems to be exactly the reverse of Corinna's disassembling herself in Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed": in this comedy, the "woman" starts out without her body, as having but one eye, no hair, no teeth, and no legs; all the missing parts will be supplied during her self-construction, during which she assembles herself into a "supremely beautiful" woman (135). Confronted with the prospect of having a wife who has no part that is "genuine" (138) or "solid" (139), André is of course happy to sneak out and not "marry that débris if she was worth a billion" (139). In this performance not only are the boundaries of gender transgressed, but those between "genuine" and "fake" too.

Third, with Millet's market value sky-rocketing in the art world, the pupils decide to continue tapping the artist's creative energies and introduce him as a Millet-imitator. They find a name for him too, Placide Duval, who would now supply an unlimited flow of Millet-imitations. Twain deconstructs the original/copy binary by giving primacy to the copy as that which will make the original original (and more valuable). Indeed, the copy is shown to be valued over the original when sold for hundreds of thousands, and the Englishman buys the original of *The Angelus* as a worthless copy. But, as Millet himself (still as the Widow) observes, people "will never know it" (129). Moreover, it is "a *fictitious* François Millet" (132; emphasis in original) who now passes as his own imitator ("Imitator of myself" [128]); it is fiction that passes as imitation, and the original/copy distinction gets conclusively erased.

3. Transgression's slippage, gender play, or girl performing woman (with a difference): Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) foregrounds an instance of gender passing usually not discussed under the heading of passing: in this case it is a preadolescent, a still boyish girl who turns into a "nymphet" or "girleen" (*Annotated Lolita* 19) in order to pass for a woman. This novel, subverting in other ways too the stability of identity (we need only to think of the Humbert-Quilty doubling or characters described as having "a salad of racial genes" [9] or "mixed parentage" [11]), puts in its center the carnal desire of the grown man for "pale pubescent girls" (16), or "girl-children" (16)—whether called Annabel or Dolores. The object of his desire is the nymphet, the Dolores/Lolita who is not a child any more but not a woman yet either.

The nymphet for Nabokov occupies a stage between girlhood and womanhood, somewhere between nine and fourteen, as he writes in the novel (16). For the Nabokov who made his name in lepidoptery by collecting and identifying butterflies, the nymphet corresponds to the "pupa" stage of insects undergoing metamorphosis. In fact, he emphasized this transitional nymphet-stage of the pupa when naming one of his lepidopterological finds "Nabokov's Wood-Nymph" (see *Annotated Lolita* 339). Expanding this nymphet/pupa metaphor, the author/lepidopterist gives the evocative name "nympholepts" to the "lone voyagers" who have a passion for collecting these nymphets (17).

Dolores the child only plays with the man first, when she still rather innocently sits on his knees or sneaks up to him from the back and plays peek-a-boo. Her transformation is marked by her first applying lipstick and eating a “banal, Eden-red apple” (58). She becomes a nymphet by responding to Humbert’s desire and becoming his creation: “my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita” (62), who starts to see herself as a “starlet” (65). When she “flows” into his arms, he realizes it was him who “willed into being” this “ineffable” life (113), while on her part it was “but an innocent game ... in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance” (113). At this stage the twelve year old Lolita is still a pupa: half-child, munching on candy bars and ice cream cones, and half-woman, flirting with the man in a seemingly innocent manner, thinking (seemingly) that they are lovers already. While laughing in a childish manner with a “young golden giggle” (119), she seems to know that their relationship verges on “incest” (119). She becomes a good performer when her *performance* involves the copying of copies, or the imitation of simulacra of fakeness—as all nymphets do, Nabokov suggests, when, in an effort to pass for a woman, they imitate “the cheapest of cheap cuties” (120). Lolita does not aim at full passing: her performance is play passing, mimicry rather, and the in-betweenness of this “fey child” is emphasized in various ways.

A combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off—a kind of diffused clowning which she thought was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. (148)

Both a girl of “very childish appearance” and one who, “owing perhaps to constant amorous exercise,” radiated “some special languorous glow” (159), she is the ultimate pupa, at home both in children’s libraries and in bed with Humbert on “violent mornings” (160). The “most mythopoetic nymphet in October’s orchard-haze” (186), who in school gives the impression that she is “morbidly uninterested in sexual matters” (195), yet knows exactly how to tempt Humbert when saying, “Carry me upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic to-night” (207).

What is very important in the novel is that Lolita’s construction is carried out as much by Humbert as Lolita. In other words, it is the man’s desire which constitutes the nymphet, who responds to this desire by her

self-construction. But what Humbert desires is not the “powdered” butterfly of a grown woman (12), but a pupa in metamorphosis, a transgressor from girlhood to womanhood. It is this in-betweenness which turns him on, giving him an “incestuous thrill” (80): seeing the nymphet verging on womanhood, the daughter turned into lover, child into woman, boy into girl even. He will not want to be wholly deceived; he does not demand full *passin* from Lolita (in fact, once a mature woman, a mother, she does not interest him any more). His obsession is rather with transgression itself: the complete destabilization of categories—metamorphosis, transitionality, in-betweenness, slippage.

I would like to conclude my paper by reiterating the following claims.

First, gender passing presents new counter-arguments to the essentialist position. Whether woman becomes woman, man becomes man or, indeed, woman becomes man or man becomes woman, gender is shown as a discursive construct constituted by bodies whose biological markers have been made irrelevant.

Second, given the constructions of passing in these texts (French male artist to female sibling, nymphet to woman), gender’s catachrestic character gets highlighted: it is shown to be a metaphor lacking its referent in “reality.” The “original” biological sex of the gender performer is made totally inconsequential: the “authenticity” of the performance has nothing to do with whether the performer is “originally” a man or a woman. In fact, there are no “original” or “true” genders to be “copied” when performed. It is not something “out there” which is cited, evoked, or imitated when gender is being performed; rather, those processes are iterated whereby gender is constructed again and again in discourse.

Third, the texts show differences in terms of agency and the degree to which they each reproduce existing scripts. The full passer, who follows normative scripts of gender performance can lay little claim to agency other than overriding “original” biological sex; here the “new” gender will be performed simply by way of letting oneself be interpellated by a powerful ideology, some well-know script of womanhood. Yet agency does get to be problematized in texts of gender passing too, especially in gender play. Gender play will not only come about from shifting back and forth between gender constructions (which can happen

in full passing too), but from the trying out of positions of in-betweenness and multiplicity, and the revealing of various forms of slippage.

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