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Howards End: Margaret, Henry, and the Situational Performance of Gender

By: Ashten Redell

ABSTRACT:

Howards End by E.M. Forster is based in the year 1910 and is set in England. The novel portrays the expected traits of men and women. Using Gender Theory and, more specifically, Judith Butler's idea of "performing gender", one can better understand the actions of two of the main characters, Henry and Margaret, based on their performance of gender. For example, Margaret allows Henry to take over her affairs when they are engaged, and Henry suppresses all emotions, each performing gender specific attributes. However, the qualities performed by these characters are continuously changing and are not always specific to one gender. For example, when Margaret is head of her household, she performs masculine traits such as making decisions about houses. This continuous transition of repressed and displayed behaviors suggest that gender qualities are on a relative continuum that ranges from masculine to feminine qualities in each individual "performed" in different situations or when not in control, such as in the event of a major crisis. Using this relative continuum and the idea of situational gender performance, this essay attempts to better understand the personalities of these two characters and what implications their gender performance has on society.

Howards End, by E.M. Forster, is a novel based in England around 1910 that portrays the expected, gender specific identities of men and women. The characters Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox each perform the expected gender based qualities of the text's time period. For example, Margaret allows Henry to take over her affairs when they are engaged, and Henry suppresses all emotion, each performing gender specific attributes. This performance of qualities specific to each gender demonstrates Judith Butler's idea introduced in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," which is the performance of gender qualities learned and acted over time rather than received through birth (Butler 901). However, the qualities performed by these characters, especially Margaret, are continuously changing and are not always specific to one gender. For example, when Margaret is head of her household, she performs masculine traits such as making decisions about houses but easily switches to more feminine qualities when she cares for her siblings and again when she becomes engaged. This continuous transition of repressed and displayed behaviors suggest that gender qualities are on a relative continuum that ranges from masculine to feminine qualities in each individual "performed" in different situations or when not in control, such as in the event of a major crisis. Through Gender Theory and, more specifically, the use of Butler's idea of "performing gender" one can better understand the actions of Margaret and Henry and study their performed qualities that are unique to each situation on a relative continuum.

Margaret Schlegel must run her household in the absence of a father figure, thus taking on a patriarchal persona. To manage these responsibilities, she must perform masculine qualities which are demonstrated when Margaret is charged with the responsibility of finding her siblings and her a new home when the lease on their flat has expired: "Margaret now lay awake at nights wondering where, where on earth they and all their belongings would be deposited in September

next” (Forster 108). Margaret’s thoughts and worries are filled with material issues involving the home and finances. As depicted by the novel, the men of this time normally took up such concerns: “One could visualize the ladies withdrawing to it [drawing room], while their lords discussed life’s realities below” (Forster 119). “Life’s realities” include the affairs usually privy to only men such as business and finance. It was common for women not to be involved in life’s trivialities such as house hunting; thus, Margaret is expressing masculine traits by worrying over a new home for her family, because she is in a situation that calls for these traits.

In order to maintain these masculine qualities, Margaret must repress some feminine attributes. Repression can be understood as “the ‘forgetting’ or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events so that they are forced out of conscious awareness” (Barry 92-93). While the reader cannot be sure that Margaret suppresses anything symbolic of this list, she does repress traits to better perform masculine duties, unconsciously. For example, Margaret suppresses displays of emotion, which is usually a feminine trait, to maintain this authoritative, masculine persona: “The affections are more reticent than the passions and their expressions more subtle” (Forster 9). Margaret believes that unless a larger reason arises for her to show emotion, it is better to keep it inside to maintain her role as head of the household. To do this, she does not openly express the love she has towards her sister but would openly express her love for a man, which is explained in the following quote: “If she herself should ever fall in love with a man, she...would proclaim it from the housetops, but as she only loved a sister she used the voiceless language of sympathy” (Forster 9). This example not only displays her repression of feminine qualities but the acknowledgement that the traits she chooses to display are based on certain situations. This change in gender performance due to the situation highlights the relative continuum of these traits and how and when they are performed.

However, in addition to running a household, Margaret must also care for her younger siblings, thus taking on the role of a mother figure which forces her to still perform some feminine traits and not repress them all. For example, she cares for her sick brother, Tibby, and also attempts to mediate her sister Helen's rash engagement. In order to do this, she takes on an authoritative persona as she tells her Aunt Juley how to handle her sister's situation: "You will remember, Aunt Juley, not to be drawn into discussing the engagement" (Forster 11). This authoritative and controlling gesture further demonstrates Margaret's masculine qualities, while the parental concern for her siblings highlight feminine qualities. She also scolds, or attends to the refinement of her siblings: "Helen you must not be so ramshackly" (Forster 32). While her authority and dominant attitude is again expressed, because the rearing of children was usually attributed to women, this quote also proves that Margaret is expressing feminine traits. Through the performance of both masculine and feminine traits, she is embodying all traits of a continuum that are exposed when the situations warrant. Because she was expected to be both mother and father to her siblings and in her household, it appears that Margaret was able to absorb both genders and their traits.

Henry Wilcox also "performs" gender based qualities. While he is not as flexible as Margaret on the gender performance continuum, like Margaret, he must also repress and express different traits to act as the masculine businessman the novel portrays him to be. For example, he is described as "a man of business", "an important figure", and "a reassuring name on company prospectuses" (Forster 96). Mr. Wilcox deals closely with finances and holds a position of power, a common male attribute. He is also the head of a family and has a patriarchal demeanor. For instance, he feels the need to protect others, women in particular: "His tones were protective" (Forster 95). Not only does Mr. Wilcox maintain a masculine role through expressing

a protective persona, he also demonstrates how the novel perceives women: weak and in need of men. Henry must maintain his own masculine identity while reminding women of their attributed traits and separating himself from those qualities.

Mr. Wilcox must not only express his masculine qualities but repress his feminine traits. Henry must hide all emotion, which the novel usually attributes to women, because men are to have “had no part with the earth and its emotions” (Forster 154). Therefore, the death of Mr. Wilcox’s wife forces Henry to hide in his room veiling the emotions he has over his dead spouse from his children, thus maintaining a masculine persona, void of emotion: “He could meet no one’s eye” (Forster 67). Henry’s role as patriarchal power in the family calls for strength and steadiness in the situation, so he must hide his distress from his children. While Henry hides these emotions, his physical appearance actually shows no weakness: “there was no external hint of weakness” (Forster 67). Not only does Henry hide the actions of his emotion, but he also maintains a masculine appearance. Henry obviously has emotions, which are typically attributed to women, but he hides them from the outside world, or he may appear weak, thus losing his powerful role as head of his family. However, this display of emotion hidden from the world further proves that each individual has the capacity to express feminine and masculine traits but chooses to express and repress different traits to maintain power or better attend to responsibilities, thus performing traits based on a situational continuum.

Because both Margaret and Henry express mostly masculine qualities, it is arguably the reason they are attracted to one another. As aforementioned, Henry maintained a protective demeanor which attracted Margaret. She saw it as “part of the good man’s equipment” (Forster 95). Not only does Margaret praise a masculine quality in Henry but also describes him as a “good man”, which seems as though she is looking for someone who is good at being a

man. Thus, one can assume that she expects and desires a counterpart with masculine traits. Henry also admits to being impressed by the masculine qualities apparent in Margaret. For example, he recognizes her ability to handle the outburst of Leonard Bast stating that “there are very few women who could have managed him” (Forster 105). He seems impressed by her influential and masculine traits. Because, the couple does not appear to have sexual attraction to each other, they instead search for camaraderie in a counterpart and are drawn together through the traits that each share. Though, one should note that Henry influences Margaret to act more womanly, which calls this argument into question. However, Margaret will not lose all masculine traits through their engagement; therefore, the attraction is significant.

Once Margaret becomes engaged to Henry, she expresses more of her feminine qualities and represses masculine traits. For example, Margaret leaps from a motor-car to challenge the system of “ladies sheltering behind men” (Forster 153). Margaret revels in her masculine tendencies. However, she suppresses her true intentions by letting the men claim her act was just one of hysteria and lets “their view of feminine nature” explain her outburst (Forster 154). Margaret is hiding her masculine and authoritative traits and conforming to the idea of a woman. Two possible reasons explain this change in Margaret. The first is that she is now engaged to a man who expects women to act a certain way which Margaret is aware of: “In dealing with a Wilcox, how tempting it was to lapse from comradeship, and to give him the kind of woman that he desired!” (Forster 164). Mr. Wilcox is the epitome of a masculine male; therefore, Margaret is easily led to perform her duty as a feminine woman because that is what he wants from her. However, this alteration can also be attributed to Margaret’s change in situations. Once the head of a family, she had to perform masculine qualities to maintain her authority. However, when she becomes engaged, she finds herself in a different situation with different expectations that call

for the expression of more feminine traits. While the reason is a mingling of both, more importantly one should note that Margaret can and does choose to express and repress different traits, again highlighting the gender continuum.

Henry continues to express masculine qualities even more than before to maintain his patriarchal power over his new fiancée, Margaret, thus choosing to continue to repress feminine tendencies. He cares for Margaret's affairs and maintains his emotionless side, especially when Margaret discovers his past affair with a prostitute. Henry maintains an air of importance and "defend[s] himself in a lurid past. It was not true repentance" (Forster 175). Henry does not allow his emotions to be set free and talks of his wrong deed as if he had no other choice. He then assures Margaret that she "mustn't worry...this is a man's business" (Forster 177). Even though Henry defended himself, he still believes that she is a woman so is not privy to this kind of knowledge about the deeds of men. Henry is maintaining his masculine authority, especially over women, while continuing to suppress emotions; therefore, he is again performing the traits needed in his situation as a fiancé, father, and businessman.

Through these examples, one can see how both Margaret and Henry have the capacity for all traits but choose to express and repress the performance of them on a continuum. However, through the climax of the novel, a crisis draws the repressed qualities of both Henry and Margaret to the surface. Margaret's sister, Helen, becomes pregnant out of wedlock and when the pregnancy is discovered by Margaret, her masculine tendencies return: "do go away, and I will manage it all" (Forster 206). She demands that Henry is not involved and takes matters into her own hands, as a male would usually have the authority to do. As a father figure to Helen, she is compelled to take on the patriarchal role she once inhabited in order to take care of her younger sister. She is now performing the masculine tendencies necessary to handle the current

situation. While she had been steadily working to perform womanly attributes to fit her new role as a wife to be, she was unable to hold back her masculine qualities in the face of a crisis.

Throughout the text, Margaret has displayed masculine, feminine, and then masculine qualities again, each surfacing to fit a certain situation. As she was performing certain traits, she was suppressing others to maintain her situational genderperformance.

Following this climatic scene in the novel, Henry's son, Charles, kills the father of Helen's unborn child. When Charles is sentenced to prison, Henry Wilcox loses control of his masculine traits and breaks down emotionally, thus uncontrollably performing feminine behaviors: "Charles may go to prison...I don't know what to do—what to do. I'm broken—I'm ended" (Forster 237). These emotions and despair are akin to hysteria usually an accepted characteristic in women only. Through this crisis in Henry's life, his authority as a patriarch is called into question because he cannot protect his son, even though he is head of his family. Therefore, Henry takes on a feminine role. He leans on Margaret for help: "he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him" (Forster 237). Henry is completely at a loss and is now ironically seeking help from a woman. However this shift to her for help only strengthens an argument made earlier, which is that Henry was attracted to Margaret because of her masculine traits. He is now dependent of the masculine qualities she possesses that once attracted him to her. Margaret has now fully resorted back to her masculine ways which limits her displays of emotion and enforces practicality: "No sudden warmth arose in her...she did not enfold the sufferer in her arms" (Forster 237). She did not feel emotion or pity towards Mr. Wilcox, thus suppressing feminine attributes.

Both Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox express and repress an array of emotions and gender roles on a continuum that are performed to fit different situations. However, throughout

the novel, Margaret changes the performance of traits the most and actually switches between them very easily without the cause being a crisis in most situations. It is apparent that Henry houses all traits but is not flexible among them. This might be because a situation does not call for Henry to change the expression and repression of traits throughout the novel until the crisis forces him to perform his gender differently. However, it is more likely that Margaret can transition so well because she absorbed the traits of both genders along with the ability to express them as the mother and father figure to her sister and brother, as well as sole head of the household. She was forced to perform both genders simultaneously in her situation with the absence of her parents. Margaret so quickly reverts to her old ways by taking care of not only her siblings but Henry as well after the crisis, because she is reinstated as head of the household and reverts back to her former role. While it seems that each individual embodies all traits on the continuum, not all are able to easily transition from one role to another. Like in Henry's situation, it appears that large scale changes can only be brought on uncontrollably in the event of a crisis.

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