

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 19. 12. 2024

# Adam and Eve

In the theatre, there is a long tradition of women playing male roles. Take for instance the character of Pierot in commedia dell'arte and Shakespeare's plays with many examples of gender swapping (*Twelfth Night*, *As You Like it* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). And the theatre tradition was followed by silent cinema. In order to increase the prestige of the new medium and attract the attention of educated audiences, films often drew inspiration from the theatre. That meant that many films adopted cross-dressing as well. In the 1910s and 1920s, female characters in trousers and suits (with respect to the period fashion trends) were accepted with much more understanding than in later eras. And cross-dressing male actors often provided much appreciated amusement. In a rather generalising tone, we can say that women dressed as men in order to improve their social status but men dressed as women for fun (with the risk of being accused of homosexuality, which was less tolerable for men than women).

We could therefore conclude that in its core, cross-dressing is an act of transgression challenging patriarchal norms and gender binarity which opens the given work to queer interpretation (see for instance Marlene Dietrich in a tuxedo in *Morocco* and Greta Garbo dressed as a man in *Queen Cristina*). Each title which includes cross-dressing personifies a queer fantasy about an escape from rigid gender roles. But as Professor Laura Horak proves in her book *Girls Will Be Boys* using many film examples, such fantasies don't always have to subvert order.

In many cases, dressing up as the other sex was linked to strengthening nationalism, militarism or the superiority of the white race. It always depends on the context in which the title was created and which could be easily overlooked while applying today's notions of what is modern and progressive. Also the clarification of social and political context in which director Václav Binovec and screenwriter Suzanne Marville made their cross-dressing comedy *Adam and Eve* (*Adam a Eva*, 1922) requires a brief

excursion to the past.

The first half the 19<sup>th</sup> century in our lands was characterised by the establishment of many unofficial and non-organised female movements built on friendly relations between women and between women and men. An important part in that process was played by the creation of many parlours, societies, book clubs, amateur theatre group and public libraries. With the emancipation movement growing stronger, the pressure on women to take care of the household and their husbands' income grew weaker.

But in order to find better use on the labour market, women needed access to education. It was the inaccessibility of higher and specialised education that for a long time excluded women from qualified professions with better pay. The industrial revolution strengthened the division of gender roles by separating the home from the workplace and simultaneously restoring the relevance of some gender stereotypes which, in turn, served as a defence against the modernising cultural influence.

Also later, when education had become more accessible, women were disadvantaged because employers preferred men who wouldn't be distracted by taking care of their households. Due to low salaries, productive female labour was an additional activity rather than a means of self-realisation. But despite that, women represented a necessary labour force in many industry fields. Along with the growing support of education and professional skills of women, the awareness of female contribution to national economy increased.

It wasn't until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when first serious discussions about gender equality took place and the feminist movement gained strength. The first suffragettes strived to achieve fundamental political, civil and human rights for women and secure equal accessibility to education. In that time, the ideal of a "new woman" emerged, who was independent, education and challenged the traditional notions of fashion, marriage and equality. It was after the First World War, specifically in February 1920, when Czech women were allowed to vote and thus became full citizens.

During the war, when women started working and served in non-combat positions, it was acceptable for them to adopt men's clothing. Women's clothing thus became less limiting and more suitable for work and sport (e.g. cycling) and commanded bigger

respect. In parallel to favourable political, economic and social changes, there were tendencies to strengthen the traditional gender order and give the power weakened during the First World War back to men. Everything under the pretence of stabilising the newly formed state which was “naturally” superior to female freedom and independence.

This ambivalence and constant balancing of two opposing forces is reflected also in *Adam and Eve*. Suzanne Marwille based the script on a story by Jarmila Hašková. She tailored both leading roles to her acting skills in order to utilise male and female gestures, postures and costumes to portray both Adam and Eve. The comedy explores humorous and painful consequences of the fact that adolescent twins Adam and Eve look alike. In the film’s prologue, Marta Marwille, daughter of the screenwriter, portrayed both of them as children.

The film begins with a variation on the Biblical expulsion from the garden of Eden. In this case, paradise being a pantry full of forbidden fruit, for instance in the form of a big jar of plum jam. Eva promises young Adam to take him to the garden of Eden as well. But only under the condition that he won’t tell on her the next time she resorts to some mischief. Eva is the mastermind of the whole operation, she’s bold, cunning and knows secrets her brother dares not dream of. But the kids are caught in the act and punishment follows. They have to learn math under the supervision of a strict governess. They decide to take revenge on her using white mice they buy in a pet shop.

After this introduction of the siblings and their characters and dynamics, the story jumps about ten years forward when Adam and Eve are both 16 years old. The events from the beginning of the film are never mentioned again. But we get to see more of Eva’s shenanigans. She pours salt into her brother’s tea and on his bread with jam. During breakfast, to manifest her free thinking, she lights a cigarette, which was back then outrageous for women in public, and puts her feet on the table. Their father, however, punishes Adam who swears vengeance on Eve.

He decides to exact it the following day when he dresses as Eva and, pleased with how he looks with a lady hat, arranges a meeting in the park with Eva’s suitor, doctor Prokop. On his way to Stromovka, still disguised as Eva, he is admonished by a lady on

the street (“the girls today are so loutish”) who gets offended by his style of walking and the way he drags a poor dog with himself. In the tram, his teacher, the bald-headed Professor Cibulka, eyes him, not knowing it’s Adam. He returns his looks and seductively draws aside his skirt. In the film, the public space is full of unwanted looks and rules how a woman should act.

In the meantime, Eva finds out about the meeting between her brother and Prokop which is about to take place, and dresses as Adam. Disguised, she informs their father about the meeting of (fake) Eva with a strange man. She basically damages her own reputation. The father takes Adam (in reality Eva) to Stromovka where they see Eva (or Adam) flirting with Prokop which enrages him so much that on the way home, he buys a new cane to properly punish her daughter. The last minutes of the strangely unbalanced film contain the most action.

Adam, dressed as Eva, successfully charmed Prokop. He apparently doesn’t realise that he cleared the way for Eva who likes Prokop. Eva, dressed as Adam, also tries to seduce Prokop without any apparent reason. It would make more sense if she communicated with him dressed as a lady. When Adam gets home, his father gives him a beating. But Eva gets a beating as well.

In a fit of anger, the father then gives a haircut to one of his children in order to prevent any further confusion. After the brutal deed is done, he finds out that instead of Adam, he has given the haircut to Eva. Adam thus eventually, and not by his own efforts, gets the revenge he probably dreamed about ever since he was a child. In the last scene, devastated Eva turns to the camera and wonders whether the doctor will still be interested in her.

Costume changes are mainly fun for Adam and Eva. Their main concern is school and establishing relationships. Due to their social standing, they don’t find any obstacles in any of this.

Due to their age, the issue of future careers isn’t relevant for them. Neither of them has a reason to leave home where a maid provides all the comfort. Their gender doesn’t limit them in any way in their home. Crossdressing doesn’t primarily represent defiance against authorities. It’s motivated by a personal retribution to a sibling, not an effort to shake the power of their father and societal norms.

Eva is a prototype of a “new woman,” who disregards ethics and gender role and doesn’t hesitate to light a cigarette during breakfast. Later, dressed as Adam, she pushes the limits of the period concerns that emancipated women want to become men. In order to express herself as she would like, and confirm she’s an adult, she doesn’t need men’s clothing. It would almost seem that in the world of the film, equality has been achieved and there’s now room for games in which men seduce and kiss other men simply because they enjoy it.

Most of the time, crossing the boundaries of gender and sexuality – with regards to the film’s genre – doesn’t bring stress and threats, but rather pleasant feelings.

Accumulating discrepancies between looks and behaviour on one hand, and authentic identity on the other is the source of the comic elements. Anxiety from fulfilling expected social roles is sublimed in the film. Instead of a state of agitation, we get a symbolic reassurance. Not even the final beating doesn’t seem to be too painful in order to discourage Adam and Eva from further experiments and ventures beyond the boundaries of social conformism.

While watching the film, however, we can ask ourselves a question whether male and female identity is based on how people dress and behave or rather on their wishes and needs. In addition to frequent crossdressing and hairstyle changes, the performative element of emphasised by repeated breaking of the fourth wall as Marwille, portraying both Adam and Eve, looking to confirm her identities, turns to the camera and thus reflects playing a certain role. *Adam and Eve* isn’t a comedy which openly criticises the patriarchy, but much like other crossdressing film, it succeeds in destroying the notion of a fixed identity and clearly defined and separated categories.

---

### **Literature:**

Lynn Abrams, *Zrození moderní ženy: Evropa 1789–1918* (The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789-1918). Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2005.

Marie Bahenská, *Počátky emancipace žen v Čechách. Dívčí vzdělání a ženské spolky v Praze v 19. století*. Praha: Libri, Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON) 2005.

Sofia Bull, Astrid Söderbergh-Widding, *Not So Silent: Women in Cinema Before Sound*. Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis 2010.

Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934*. Rutgers University Press 2016.

Jiří Martínek, Pavla Vošáhlíková, *Cesty k samostatnosti: portréty žen v éře modernizace*. Prague: Historický ústav AV ČR 2010.

Martina Pachmanová, *Zrození umělkyně z pěny limonády*. Prague: The Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague 2013.

Zdeněk Štábla, *Data a fakta z dějin čs. kinematografie, 1896–1945*. Prague: ČSFÚ 1988.

Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873–1935*. Johns Hopkins University Press 2004.