

## Notes on Exchanging Hats by Elizabeth Bishop:

The poem "Exchanging hats", in Elizabeth Bishop's body of work, is an exposition of what Judith Butler calls gender trouble. Giving emphasis to gender ambiguity and the ironic tone revealed in the lyrical voice, the poem dramatizes and complicates the performativity of gender constructions.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry has usually been associated with the themes of traveling and displacement. At least two of her books, *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1978), are almost entirely dedicated to this subject, which can also be found sparsely in her other publications. The issue of gender and sexuality, however, if not so conspicuous in her poetry, still remains an important key to understanding Bishop's work. A poem like "Exchanging Hats", published in 1979, is one which deals in quite a straightforward manner with the subject matter of gender. Although there are authors who suggest that "Bishop uses the theatricality of verse to simultaneously unveil and disguise her unorthodox identity" (Lombardi, 1995, p. 65), thus bridging the gap between the 'author' and the text, I will not insist, in this article, on this line of thought. My reading of gender and sexuality in "Exchanging Hats" requires that we see the poem not as an expression of Bishop's sexuality, but that we focus on the discursive elements that create performances, masks, masquerades under which lies no essential truth about the author, but that perform the very impossibility of reaching such truth.

"Exchanging Hats" is paradigmatic of what Judith Butler (1990) calls 'gender trouble'. This article proposes, then, a reading of the poem which emphasises gender ambiguity and ironic tone in an attempt to show that "Exchanging Hats" dramatises and complicates the performativity of gender constructions, as its ambiguous lyrical voice moves from identification to detachment in relation to the "aunts" and "uncles" addressed to in the poem. The lyrical voice's ambiguity is seen here as a result of the use of irony, which, at the same time, creates an identification of this voice with the subversive practices of sexuality (notably homoerotic) and produces a sense of segregation in relation to them. The act of 'wearing' hats, of dressing up, of creating a performance that eventually problematizes the disjunction nature X culture and the notion of essential identities is a trace that "Exchanging Hats" shares with another of Bishop's poems: "Pink Dog".