

« Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters? ».
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« Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters? ».
Sous la direction de Pascale Drouet, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine et Imke Lichterfeld.
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Université de Poitiers, 2024.

Sommaire

Pascale Drouet, **Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine** & **Imke Lichterfeld**

Introduction: “How we commit ourselves” **1**

I. “The body of a weak and feeble woman”: Gender-conscious Casting, Voice, and Body

Adele Lee

“Thy small pipe […] shrill and sound”: Vocal Bias in Cross-Gender Shakespeare **7**

Sara Reimers

Casting, Gender, and the Creation of Meaning in Contemporary Shakespearean Performance **19**

Kiki Lindell Tersmeden

“On Mere Necessity”: Gender-Bending — From Pragmatical Solution to Ideological Undertaking **37**

II. “Invade the borders”: Transgressing Expectations

Francesca Forlini

Hamlet, Thy Name Is Woman: Cross-Gendered Casting in Antonio Latella’s *Hamlet* (2021) **52**

Anikó Oroszlán

Art made tongue-tied by authority”: Re-Gendering Prospero and Lear in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre **72**

III. “The heart and stomach of a king”: Regendering Monarchy

Elizabeth Dieterich

“Mad Composition!”: Gender, Historiography, and Performance in Royal Shakespeare Company Productions of *King John* (2012, 2019) **88**

Bohdan Korneliuk

Richard after Richard: Gender Fluid Monarch Cutting Cabbage on His/Her Own **114**

Imke Lichterfeld

Gender Changes and the Weak-Queen Dilemma **123**

Varia

John Delsinne

« I know the disciplines of war » (*Henry V*, III.2.141) : faire « théâtre » des traités militaires ? **143**

L'Œil du spectateur. Play Reviews

Imke Lichterfeld

"I love myself. I hate myself." Richard III, dir. Evgeny Titov **173**

Yuliia Shchukina & **Liudmyla Vaniuha**

Romeo @ Juliet, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi: "Have you ever watched *Romeo and Juliet* with a helmet on?" **179**

Nathalie Robert-Jurado

Romeo and Juliet au Globe, printemps 2024 : acrobatique et virevoltant **187**

Sabina Laskowska-Hinz

Henry IV, Our Saviour? **197**

Estelle Rivier-Arnaud & **Chloé Giroud**

Les Shakespeare immersifs de Léonard Matton, récit d'une aventure prometteuse **208**

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"Into something rich and strange"
Ariel, *The Tempest* (I.2.402)

Actors bring drama to life: "Casting is a fundamental aspect of interpreting Shakespeare's plays in performance and reflects the values, anxieties, and preoccupations of our society."[1] Female actors have been allowed on the professional English stage since the Restauration in 1660, and the practice of casting female actors has increasingly developed since then. Recently there have been a number of female actors to play Shakespearean male characters and we can witness a rise of all-female companies to perform Shakespeare's plays, e.g. in an all-female *Richard II* (National, 1995), a *Richard III* (Globe, 2003), or a *King Lear* (Bulandra, 2010). Every now and then in the past 200 years, a female actor has donned Hamlet's "inky cloak" (I.2.77)[2] for an artistic tour de force starting with Sarah Siddons (from 1775 to 1805), Julia Glover (1820), Charlotte Cushman (1861, after Romeo to her sister Susan, 1854), Alice Marriott (1864), Giacinta Pezzana (1878), Sarah Bernhardt (1900), Suzanne Després (1913), Asta Nielsen (film 1921) to Maxine Peake (2014, film in 2015), Michelle Terry (2018), Cush Jumbo (2021), Anne Alvaro (2021), or tried themselves in relatively neutral or genderless roles as Ariel (Priscilla Horton in 1838, Aranka Várady in 1925, Giulia Lazzarini in 1983, *Tempest*s directed by Macready, Hevesi, and Strehler, respectively). Lately, women have played Prospero (Helen Mirren 2010), Richard III (Kathryn Hunter 2003), or King Lear (Glenda Jackson 2019).

In Shakespeare's time, drama companies were exclusively male. In fact, "[p]laying the opposite sex is as old as theatre",[3] Richard Hornby reminds us. (Hornby 1996: 641). Will Fisher argues that clothes in early modern culture were deemed an essential part of a person's identity: indeed, he explains that corporeal signs of a biological sex materialising the gender of a person were not seen as superior to outer garments.[4] Boys playing female roles on the early modern English stage was partly seen as confirming gender stereotypes, partly considered as transgressive. Confirming this aspect, Jean E. Howard states that "crossdressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance."[5] Cross-casting characters on stage offers new angles on the dynamics of a play in the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, RSC Deputy Artistic Director Erica Whyman devoted the 2018 winter season to productions featuring a female Mercutio and Prince Escalus (*Romeo and Juliet*), Timon (*Timon of Athens*), Thersites, Agamemnon, Aeneas and Calchas (*Troilus and Cressida*).

This collection of articles is the result of a seminar presented at the 2023 Conference of the European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) in Budapest. We committed ourselves to questioning and comparing gender changes in casting in the variety of European practices. How significant is this increase? Is it punctual or the start of a significant change? What are the motivations behind these casting choices? Are they prompted by professional skills, ideological or/and socio-political stakes? How do they influence practice (voice training, costume designing, acting etc.)? Are these changes supposed to pass unnoticed, or are they meant to imply that the actresses are giving a feminine touch or a sense of otherness to the part? What value do they bring? How do the gender frictions they create invite us to change our vision of the play? Do these casting choices lead us to "something rich and strange" (I.2.402)?[6] How are these productions received both by audiences and critics?

We had in mind to leave doors open to any style, whether on a large scale or a fairly private context, to favour different perspectives, diverse approaches to the topic of role changes on

stage, of female actors taking on male parts. We also wanted to leave open the exploration of the text, whether there were changes from masculine pronouns to feminine ones, changes of names of characters, as in Matthias Langhoff's *Un Cabaret Hamlet* (2008-2009), which featured a female protagonist, Amleta, or Erica Whyman who cast Charlotte Josephine as Mercutia in her *Romeo and Juliet* (Stratford, 2018) as a reminder of present-day violent female teenagers. At the beginning of this project, we had in mind a historical approach as there had been so many grandiose attempts which left such a strong mark all over Europe and America, all through the nineteenth century, especially as in France we were just celebrating Sarah Bernhardt's hundredth anniversary of her death with exhibitions and books.

To our surprise and our delight, we did not get full studies of female actors of the past, only fleeting references, or passing remarks. Is it because so many studies have been devoted to them already? Have past practices been fully explored? Is it not necessary to go back to them with new perspectives, new sources, new approaches? Have we had enough of these formidable characters who made the headlines for their parts and scandalous lives? Afterall they were not entirely human but promoted to a much higher status belonging to the emerging star system.

This volume is a testament to how our contributors commit themselves. The focus of attention of the papers we received was not turned towards exceptional renderings of the past but were definitely grounded in the present, starting with Fiona Shaw's impersonation of Richard II in 1995 as a kind of reference point. The interest of the contributors did not lie in the exceptional but in the ordinary. This might reflect upon contemporary ideas of a shifting gender spectrum, the goals of feminism, and questions of equity in the theatre business: "Today, gender formation is typically imagined as a developmental process in which a person begins with a set of natural biological characteristics [the individual's sex] that are then modified or 'constructed' by society and experience",[7] Fisher observes. Such gender representation is also reflected on the modern stage. Can castings be considered as experiments or simply a feature of our times when younger generations recognize themselves in more fluid terms? It seems more natural to play with gender, whether it is blatant, casual, or hidden. It may bring a new approach, a new meaning, or be absolutely neutral. The fact is that this practice is very much on the rise, and concerns far more plays than in the past, not only comedies or *Hamlet,* but also historical plays.

The articles in this volume cover a wide range of topics and themes. Among those that we deem of specific value are those addressing female empowerment and questions of agency. Do female castings destabilise the dynamics presented on stage or do they send a powerful political message about female strength. How is the gender spectrum represented and to what extend might this play with sexual tensions on stage? What agenda does gender-conscious casting promote? The volume *Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)male Characters?* consists of four parts. The three first chapters form a trio on gender-conscious casting, voice, and body (Part I), then follow two chapters on the regendering of some of Shakespeare's protagonists in specific adaptations (Part II), and the three final chapters concentrate on the history plays (Part III).

Part I ("The body of a weak and feeble woman": Gender-conscious Casting, Voice and Body") contains an article on the voice and specifically the effect of the female voice by Adele Lee; Sara Reimers' contribution discusses feminism and misogyny when it comes to casting, and the third chapter in this section by Kiki Lindell highlights practical aspects of casting and the consequences of pragmatism.

Concentrating on Antonio Latella's *Hamlet*, Francesca Forlini ponders questions of cross-gendered casting, while Aniko Oroszlan introduces two Hungarian regendered rulers in *The Tempest*'s Prospero and *King Lear* in Part II ("Invade the borders": Transgressing Expectations) which deals with the transgression of conventions and expectations.

Part III ("The heart and stomach of a king": Regendering Monarchy) introduces issues of history. Elizabeth Dieterich, Bogdan Korneliuk, and Imke Lichterfeld elucidate the effects of regendered monarchy, Dieterich on *King John*, Korneliuk on *Richard III*, and Lichterfeld on *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, as well as the tragicomic *Cymbeline*.

The process of cross-gendering casts or regendering characters is thriving at the present moment on the theatre stages, be they national or confidential, professional or from the voluntary sector. The future will tell us whether this is just a passing trend, or a well-grounded practice.

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Notes

[1] Sarah Reimers, *Casting and the Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Performances of Shakespeare's Plays*, Ph.D. Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017, 2016.

[2] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard, Oxford, Oxford University Press, The Oxford Shakespeare, (1987) 1994.

[3] Richard Hornby, "Cross-Gender Casting", *Hudson Review*, vol. 48, n°4, 1996, p. 641.

[4] See William Fischer, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[5] Jean E. Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 39, n°4, 1988, p. 418.

[6] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, London, Thomson Learning, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), (1999) 2003.

[7] William Fischer*, Materializing Gender, op. cit.*, p. 4.

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“Thy small pipe […] shrill and sound”: Vocal Bias in Cross-Gender Shakespeare

Par Adele Lee
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ABSTRACT

Prompted by the feminist viewpoint that female actors deserve equal access to leading parts and accelerated by recent efforts to create a more inclusive theatre (and film) industry, all-female casts have been responsible for some of the most powerful productions of Shakespeare in recent years. However, similar to how women's first arrival on stage was not an unmitigated improvement, we must be careful not to overemphasize how progressive these productions are, especially given transmasculine performance is frequently met with confusion, disbelief and even disdain. In particular, this essay highlights that the voice of female actors has proven a bugbear for critics and audiences alike with many decrying cross-gender casting on the grounds that a boy's voice can sound like a woman's, but a woman's voice hardly ever sounds like a man's. Indeed, given harsh criticism of the vocal development, delivery and transformation to "masculine" gender placements and pitches in the performances of women playing male Shakespeare, the practice risks reinforcing rather than challenging gender essentialism and underscores continued gender-based discrimination in the industry in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS

cross-gender, gender-swapped, all-female, transmasculine, voice, accent, aural performativity

There is a long and rich history of women playing male characters in Shakespeare, especially the role of Hamlet,[1] a convention that stretches as far back as the eighteenth century when acting icon Sarah Siddons performed the role nine times. Asta Nielson also famously played the Danish Prince in 1921, interpreting him as either a female or a trans male in love with Horatio, while more recently Frances de la Tour (1979), Ruth Mitchell (1992), Angela Winkler (2000), Maxine Peake (2014), Michelle Terry (2018) and Cush Jumbo (2021) have all taken on the role in productions that, on the surface at least, interrogate patriarchy and problematize heteronormative thinking about gender and sexuality.

As this list attests, the number of so-called "breeches' roles" has significantly increased in the last couple of decades; indeed, it has become "all the rage" in the words of one disgruntled theatre critic, Mark Lawson, who views the trend as more "problematic than enlightening."[2] Stemming, in large part, from the feminist viewpoint that female actors deserve equal access to leading parts, and accelerated by recent efforts to create a more inclusive theatre (and film) industry, all-female casts have been responsible for some of the most powerful and memorable productions of *Julius Caesar* (directed by Phyllida Lloyd and starring Harriet Walter in 2012), *Henry VI* Parts 1, 2 and 3 (a.k.a. *Bring Down the House* directed by Rosa Joshi in 2019) and *Richard II* (directed and starring Adjoa Andoh in 2019), among others. "Wearing the codpiece," these companies pose a threat to conventional gender and sexual identities and many productions—Phyllida Lloyd's 2012 *As You Like It*, for example, as well as the work of theatre companies like Split Britches (founded in 1980)—are intentionally lesbian.

However, similar to how women's first arrival on stage was not an unmitigated "improvement" because representation "is the vehicle of progress and regression at one and the same time,"[3] we must be careful not to over-emphasize how new (17th-century prosthetic beards and steel breastplates suggest "codpiece daughters" existed in the Renaissance) or, more importantly, how progressive these productions are. It is worth remembering that:

> Initially, actresses were encouraged to wear men's clothes and to play male roles *not* to increase the number of highly complex characters in their repertoire, but rather to provide an opportunity to dress them in tight fitting, knee length pants (breeches) that exposed their hips and legs. Breeches roles were designed to show off the female body—there was no question of the actress truly impersonating a man.[4]

It is also worth noting, as others have, that the misogyny that arguably "resides deep in the bones of [Shakespeare's] plays" is not automatically "ameliorated by merely adding women to the cast."[5] This is especially the case when the productions starring female actors in male roles remain otherwise faithful to the original and no significant changes are made to the plot, script or characterization. Further, while actors like Fiona Shaw, Kathryn Hunter and Vanessa Redgrave, who have played Richard II, King Lear and Prospero, respectively, in performances variously described as "androgynous" (i.e., possessing both masculine and feminine qualities), "butch" (i.e. possessing mainly masculine qualities) and "gender-bending" (critics grapple to find the appropriate term) challenge patriarchy and normative constructions of gender identity, their performances in general do not offer a radical "shake-up" of the establishment. For, although women performing masculinity has the potential to turn theatre into "a laboratory in which gender identity can be re-made,"[6] similar to in Shakespeare's time, transmasculine performance, I argue, is frequently met with confusion, disbelief and even disdain.

To some, the build of the female body, its lack of physical prowess, limits women's ability to convincingly pull off fight and battle scenes. To others, the gestures, expressions and facial features of female actors "ruin" the latter's attempts to "pass" as male protagonists, even though in many performances the intention is clearly to re-gender male characters or to reconceive them as gender-neutral or flexible. It is the voice of female actors playing male parts that has proven a particular bugbear for critics and audiences alike, however: deemed less authoritative because of its higher pitch and, due as much to vocal tract lengths as to social conventions, perceived as too soft and quiet for leading (read, male) roles, the voice style of, for instance, Fiona Shaw and Vanessa Redgrave (whose considerable frame and mannish demeanor have been praised) has been criticized for "lack[ing] the ringing command often inherent in the lines."[7] Even in regards to "gripping" performances such as Kathryn Hunter's Richard III at the Globe Theatre in 2003, critics (mostly male) deride these actors' oral abilities: for instance, Charles Spencer wrote in *The Telegraph* that one of the reasons Hunter "fails to convincingly portray the monarch's spiritual and psychological disintegration" is due to her accent, which has "something of the caw about it,"[8] i.e., it's birdlike and, by implication, *small*. Commenting on the same performance, Benedict Nightingale likewise faulted Hunter's voice, claiming in *The Sunday Times* that her attempts to lower it to make it more masculine led to her becoming "almost inaudible."[9] Vanessa Redgrave's high-profile turn as Prospero in the Globe Theatre's 2000 production of *The Tempest* was similarly faulted due to her voice, which apparently "descended to a gruff nasal whine" and even sounded "Celtic" in her attempt to adopt a more "rough and ready" or "macho" persona.[10] Commenting on the same performance, Stephen Fay (*The Independent*, May 28, 2000) wrote that "nothing suffers more than the verse, which dribbles out in broken-backed sentences." Meanwhile, Nicholas de Jongh pointedly claimed that Redgrave's performance was evidence that "gender-bending damages at least one vital organ—the voice."[11] In his view, then, "Redgrave's apparent failure to speak the verse well was a direct result of playing against gender, which underscores the popular perception that women's cross-gender performances of Shakespeare will always be inadequate or 'illegitimate'."[12]

The prevalence of such harsh comments, many of which (alarmingly) reflect early modern views about the female voice as "unpleasant, 'squekinge' or inaudible,"[13] has contributed to a sense that, overall, gender-swapping is somewhat of a failure. This perceived failure is summed up by Terri Power, who states:

> Shakespeare's theatre is a performance of words, articulation, rhythm, language, structure and story. If an actor's vocal instrument is not highly tuned and fully developed to handle the vocal performance demands of Shakespeare's text, then the whole performance convention falls disastrously flat. Shakespeare's audiences still arrive at the theatre ready to "hear" (*audire*) a play as opposed to being spectators (*spectre*) … [Thus] the vocal precision and performance of gender will be critiqued especially in cross-gender castings.[14]

Grace Tiffany likewise decries cross-gender casting on the grounds that "a boy's voice can sound like a woman's" (which chimes with Shakespeare's description of boys as having "women's voices" in *Richard II* [III.2.113]), but a woman's voice, despite being lower pitched in the 21st century, "hardly ever sounds like a man's."[15] The same scholar also argues that "a Black actor could successfully play King Lear, but not a female, because Lear's maleness is so deeply inscribed in his character that to cross-cast him would be to distort him."[16] There are exceptions,

of course, most notably Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876), who was "served well" by the fact her voice was "deeper, huskier, and breathier than most women's,"[17] and more recently Angela Iannone, whose voice is also famed for its full contralto register (the lowest female voice type). Moreover, many other women playing male characters have been applauded for their delivery style, even when they worry their voices are not loud or deep enough: Famed Catalan actress Margarita Xirgu, for example, feared "her voice would not be good enough to convey Hamlet's philosophical tone," but she ended up (in 1938) "project[ing] a transvestite [sic] Hamlet that would be […] natural and spontaneous."[18] Sarah Siddons' "exquisite skill" in "modulating [her] voice to give a separate identity to the bold but stern tones of Macbeth," which starkly contrasted with the shrillness of her delivery of the child apparitions' lines and the monotonousness of her delivery of the Weird Sisters' lines, is also worth noting as an example of the vocal dexterity of some female Shakespeareans. More contemporaneously, one should highlight the praise Ann Ogbomo received for her part as Claudio in Tamara Harvey's 2004 production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, especially for her "deep voice," which was the main reason one critic, Claire Allfree, claimed Ogbomo's "is the only performance [in an all-female cast] who makes the audience believe she is a man."[19] Likewise, one of the reasons Janet McTeer garnered acclaim for her role as Petruchio in Phyllida Lloyd's 2016 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* was due to the lower pitch of her voice, even though she did not bind her chest or cut her hair or otherwise try to "pass" as a man.

Nevertheless, given the emphasis placed on masculine similitude and the general criticism levelled at female actors playing traditionally male parts for the "inadequacy" of their accents, most modern cross-casting seems to emphasize rather than elide gender difference; indeed, Grace Tiffany suggests many modern-day gender-swapped productions are "designed not to sustain, as did Shakespeare, the illusion of the character's sex, but to undermine that illusion."[20] This is because attention to voice, its vocal development, delivery and transformation to "masculine" gender placements and pitches in the performances of women playing male Shakespeare roles is construed as absolutely necessary to successful cross-gender performances.[21] Perhaps, therefore, instead of challenging gender essentialism, actresses playing Shakespearean male characters, most of whom it should be noted are cisgender, could indeed be reinforcing it.

Certainly, in the Renaissance the voice was deployed to bolster gender boundaries and reinforce the inferiority of the female sex: Described as "lisping" during one of Hamlet's misogynistic rants (perhaps a reflexive allusion to boy actors), female speech was often ridiculed and denigrated and used as evidence of innate difference. More specifically, it was believed that the cooler heat of the male body, which affects the size of the windpipe, resulted in men having graver and louder voices than their shrill and squeaky female counterparts.[22] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s Bottom, for instance, imagines with embarrassment himself speaking in "a monstrous little voice" if cast in a female role, and mispronouncing Thisbe "Thisne" (I.2.54-55), thereby suggesting female accents are akin to a speech impediment. Viola's "small pipe," her "maiden's organ," is derided as "shrill and sound" in *Twelfth Night* (I.4.35-36) and, ultimately, it is the main thing that betrays her biological sex, thus highlighting the importance of the voice in gender construction. In other plays, Shakespeare constructs a strict male-female binary through vocal performance: Women, it is stressed in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, "speak small" (I.1.40), while in *King Lear*, their voices are regarded as "soft / Gentle and low" (V.3.273) as well as associated with bodily fluids like milk and blood, hence why they are more inclined to lose the kind of vocal control men exercise and start "babbling," which is precisely how Redgrave's

aforementioned performance as Prospero is described when one critic says she "dribbles" her lines.

The voice, then, is perceived as an insurmountable barrier to female actors either being taken seriously or being able to convincingly "pass" as men. As Dympna Callaghan puts it, "unlike beards, codpieces, and so on, voice is not available as a stage property."[23] Interestingly, the impersonation of the female voice was regarded as the most vulnerable aspect of "the woman's part" for Shakespearean boy-actors in the early modern era, and many jokes at the time centered on the failure of males trying to sound like females. In fact, contrary to expectations, there are few recorded complaints about the appearance of male actresses, just their *voices*. Even Edward Kynaston, the most highly-praised player of women's roles in the seventeenth century, is thought to have struggled to perfect a feminine voice style: As Samuel Pepys famously remarked after seeing the actor in a production of John Fletcher's *The Loyal Subject* at the Cockpit-in-Court, "Kynaston is the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life, only her voice [is] not very good."[24] All this would explain why, when resolving to "put our selves in Womens apparel," the suitors in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), who are desperate to infiltrate and destroy the matriarchal utopia formed by Lady Happy, bemoan "our Voices will discover us: for […] it will be as great a difficulty to raise our Voices to a Treble-sound, as for Women to press down their Voices to a Base."[25] Making a mockery of transfeminine performances, the wooers imply the impossibility of "passing" due to the difference in pitch (typically almost an octave) between men's and women's voices. Thus, in the Renaissance, it was overwhelmingly the vocal aspect of stage femininity that was found wanting, with several eyewitness accounts referring to the auditory insufficiency of the boy actor's "crackt organ pipes" and their "squeaking" impersonations of femininity.[26] Similarly, in the 21st century, it seems to be overwhelmingly the vocal aspect of stage *masculinity* that is found wanting in "breeches' roles."

Nevertheless, evidence also suggests that the taking of female parts by men was, for the most part, accepted as "verisimilitude" by early modern audiences, and even in *The Convent of Pleasure,* a male successfully "passes" as a female in the form of the "Princess" thereby rendering the aforementioned wooers the real butt of the joke. Ultimately, though, "passing" is not the point. In fact, the politics of passing, as Jennifer Drouin has shown, risks replicating pre-existing gender binaries rather than offering a more liberatory approach to identity and its presentation. To quote Jennifer Drouin,

> It's concern[ing] when passing is to signify not the fluidity of gender, but rather one's firm entrenchment within its fixed sex-derived categories. While drag highlights that all gender is an illusion, the aim of passing is for the illusion to signify as real in the public sphere.[27]

Perhaps because of this, more and more women playing traditionally male characters in Shakespeare are not even *trying* to appear masculine or perfect the similitude of either a man or a woman. Indeed, many actors, such as Rena Matsui, who was behind an all-female *Julius Caesar* in 2012 (Parco Theater, Japan) do not feel a need to alter their voices or to mimic the "opposite sex" in attire or deportment: "We don't speak in low voices to pretend to be men, and we don't wear trousers, but simple dresses. So, we look (and sound) like women—but speak as male characters—and it seems very natural to me," Matsui explains.[28] Likewise, Michelle Terry kept her "girlish" chin length curls in her 2018 turn as *Hamlet* and neither she nor Bettrys Jones, who

played Laertes, lowered their voices in an attempt to seem more "masculine."[29] Adjoa Andoh, who played Richard II in all female and all-Black cast in 2019, also did not succumb to any pressure to put on their "best blokey acting," intentionally eschewing any gender or racial signifiers, and instead aiming for a performance "beyond melanin and genitalia."[30]

This movement beyond gender and towards "genderless drama" or gender-neutral drama signals in many ways the end of "female-to-male" crossdressing, a label considered "reductive, offensive, and directional" by Alexa Alice Joubin and that "makes about as much sense as calling someone a heterosexual-to-gay man."[31] Increasingly, therefore, the goal, and typically the affect, of more recent cross-gender performances is to present a spectrum of gender identities, permitting qualities of masculinity and femininity to be in play simultaneously. Such actors—whether they identify as male, female or non-binary—in a sense, then, have "many bodies" and release a "complex citation of gender identities" that underscores the performativity of gender.[32]

In this way, and others, women actors playing historically male parts in Shakespeare are moving closer to embodying the same level of androgyny and gender fluidity as the boy actors in the early modern period. In such a context, the relative masculinity or femininity of the sound of their voices matters less, and it simply becomes one of many components of identity in characters who are first and foremost, human beings. It is especially significant that more and more twenty-first productions have started casting trans or gender non-conforming actors, as opposed to cisgender ones, which signals that we are moving beyond "representing diversity on stage as image, imagining inclusivity through identity-as-metaphor and developing a full diversity *practice* rooted in access for all."[33] Thus the Shakespearean stage is increasingly a site of gender and sexual versatility and the thespians associated with it uniquely adept at pushing back against gender binarism and bringing a lot of purely "queer energy" to the narrative. This energy takes multiple forms, including drag and camp stylization, which is consonant with the theatrical and sexual energies of the early modern playhouse. For sure, the emergence of theatre companies like the aforementioned Split Britches as well as Gay Sweatshop (a theatre group founded in 1975), and given the pioneering efforts of directors such as Rosa Joshi, whose *1 Henry VI* (2019) included non-binary actors, and Melisa Pereyra Joshi, whose 2023 version of *Coriolanus* by the Actors' Shakespeare Project starred an all-female/non-binary cast, promise to bring us closer to early modern gender nonconformism. Loosening the grip of an establishment that has anchored Shakespearean actors in heteronormativity and gender binarism, the work of Robin Craig and Jack Doyle's Transgender Shakespeare Company, in particular, is taking us beyond "female-to-male" gender-swapping; although the threats on social media ignited by the announcement that the Globe's *I, Joan* (2022) starring Isobel Thom would portray Joan of Arc as non-binary suggest they face considerable pushback. Such backlashes uncannily echo anti-theatricalists in Shakespeare's time and throw into sharp relief the extent to which Shakespeare still has the potential to trouble dominant thinking about gender. And if the predictions of Brenda Lark and their team of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, are correct and "all productions of plays by William Shakespeare will be queer re-imaginings of the original texts by January of 2030,"[34] then we are set to see Shakespearean actors construed in a way that's more in line with how we currently construe Shakespeare and his plays, i.e. as non-confirming and genderqueer and, most importantly, speaking in a voice than is free from gender-specific signifiers and prejudices.

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Notes

[1] And to a lesser degree, Shakespeare's other effeminate hero, Romeo.

[2] Mark Lawson, "What a piece of work is a (wo)man: the perils of gender-crossed Shakespeare," *The Guardian*, Sept 23, 2014. One might also want to note Benedict Nightingale's initial response to women playing male parts in Shakespeare in 1995 as a coup d'état by "radical feminists with beards" (*The Times*, June 5, 1995).

[3] Max Horkheimer and. Theodor W. Adorno*, Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York, Continuum, 1972, p. 35.

[4] Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 56.

[5] Nora Williams, "Incomplete Dramaturgies," *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 40, n°1, 2022, p. 6.

[6] Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and English National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 7.

[7] Terri Power, *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice*, London, Palgrave, 2016, p. 103.

[8] Charles Spencer, review of *Richard III* at Shakespeare's Globe, *The Telegraph*, June 12, 2003.

[9] Benedict Nightingale, *The Sunday Times*, Jun 12, 2003.

[10] Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 2, 2000.

[11] Quoted in Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 111.

[12] *Id*.

[13] Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, p. 24.

[14] Terri Power, *op. cit*., p. 88.

[15] Grace Tiffany, "How Revolutionary is Cross-Cast Shakespeare? A Look at Five Contemporary Productions," in Lois Potter and Arthur F. Kinney (eds), *Shakespeare, Text and Theater: Essays in Honor of Jay L. Halio*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2000, p. 120.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 121.

[17] Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2000, p. 118. Notably, Cushman often completely lost her voice perhaps as a consequence of her sustained efforts to lower it.

[18] José Manuel González, "Women Playing Hamlet on the Spanish Stage," in McMullan et al. (eds.), *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception and Performance*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 277.

[19] Review of *Much Ado*, *The Metro* (London), June 4, 2004.

[20] Grace Tiffany, "How Revolutionary is Cross-Cast Shakespeare?", in *op. cit*., p. 120.

[21] Terri Power, *op. cit*., p. 89

[22] Gina Bloom, *op. cit*., p. 33.

[23] Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 52.

[24] Owen Frederick Morshead (ed.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* [1660], New York, Harper and Row, 1960, p. 62.

[25] Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), Scene IV. **URL**. Accessed June 2, 2024. n. p.

[26] Dympna Callaghan, *op. cit*., p. 73.

[27] Jennifer Drouin, "Cross-Dressing, Drag, and Passing: Slippages in Shakespearean Comedy," in James C. Bulman (ed.), *Shakespeare Re-dressed: Cross-gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008, p. 30.

[28] Quoted in Nobuko Tanaka, "Rena Matsui tackles Shakespeare in an all-female *Julius Caesar*," *The Theatre Times*, 30 Nov 2021. **URL**. Accessed Oct 13, 2024.

[29] Terry was slammed for this in several reviews, with one critic jibing: "No one but Ms Terry would have hired Ms Terry for this role. She's a decent second-tier actress without any special *vocal* or physical endowments" (emphasis mine). Lloyd Evans, Review of *Hamlet*, *The Spectator* (Australia), June 2, 2018.

[30] Quoted in Greg Morrison, "Making sense of history: Adjoa Andoh on Richard II," *Shakespeare's Globe website*, 12 September 2019. **URL**. Accessed Oct 13, 2024.

[31] See her "Trans as Method," an Introduction to *Contemporary Transgender Performances of Shakespeare*, a special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, vol. 14, n°2, 2023, p. 1-19.

[32] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[33] Erin Julian and Kim Solga, "Ethics: The challenge of practicing (and not just representing) diversity at the Stratford Festival of Canada," in Kathryn Price and Peter Kirwan (eds.), *The Arden Handbook of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama: Perspectives on Culture, Performance and Identity*, London, Bloomsbury Arden, 2022, p. 203.

[34] Damien Kronfield, "All Shakespeare Productions Projected to Be Queer Reimaginings by 2030," *Reductress*, July 22, 2019. **URL**. Accessed May 21, 2023.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Casting, Gender, and the Creation of Meaning in Contemporary Shakespearean Performance

Par Sara Reimers
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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of women playing Shakespeare's men has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, as the practice becomes more widespread in professional UK performance contexts. While many scholars attempt to find commonalities in "cross-gender" approaches to casting, in practice the variety of methods used and complexity of meaning they create negate any universal assertions about its dramaturgical significance. This paper surveys a range of casting practices which disrupt the gender dynamics of Shakespeare's text, exploring the way casting operates within a production's dramaturgy. Focussing specifically on three recent UK productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* in which Petruchio was played by a woman, it argues that casting is increasingly being used to legitimise stagings of this troubling play. Analysing the way women performers have approached playing this agent of misogyny, this paper advocates for the concept of "gender-fluid" casting, a mode of conceptualising casting which recognises the complexities, contradictions, and slippages that occur when women play Shakespeare's men.

KEYWORDS

casting, gender, Shakespeare, women playing men, regendering, cross-gender casting, *The Taming of the Shrew*

RÉSUMÉ

Le cas d'actrices incarnant des personnages masculins de Shakespeare n'a cessé d'attirer l'attention des chercheurs ces dernières années, à mesure que cette pratique se répandait dans les contextes professionnels britanniques. Alors que de nombreux chercheurs tentent de trouver des points communs dans les approches « transgenres » de la distribution des rôles, dans la pratique, la variété des méthodes utilisées et la complexité du sens qu'elles produisent annulent toute affirmation universelle quant à leur signification dramaturgique. Cet article passe en revue une série de pratiques de casting qui perturbent la dynamique des genres dans le texte de Shakespeare ; il explore la manière dont le casting opère dans la dramaturgie d'une production. En se concentrant spécifiquement sur trois productions britanniques récentes de La Mégère apprivoisée dans lesquelles Petruchio était joué par une femme, cet article entend démontrer que la distribution est de plus en plus utilisée pour légitimer les mises en scène de cette pièce troublante. En analysant la manière dont les interprètes féminines ont abordé l'interprétation de cette incarnation de la misogynie, cet article plaide en faveur du concept de distribution « fluide », un mode de conception de la distribution qui reconnaît les complexités, les contradictions et les dérapages qui se produisent lorsque des femmes interprètent les hommes de Shakespeare.

MOTS-CLÉS

distribution, genre, Shakespeare, femmes incarnant des hommes, genres repensés, distribution à genres inversés, *La Mégère apprivoisée*

Introduction: Women Playing Shakespeare's Men in Contemporary UK Performance

Since the millennium, the practice of women playing men in UK performances of Shakespeare has gone from "gimmick casting to standard practice".[1] While in the first fifteen years of the 21st century, women made up just 27% and 28% of acting companies at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and Shakespeare's Globe respectively,[2] now the RSC has moved towards a 50-50 casting policy and Shakespeare's Globe has publicly committed to the same target across all its casting. Elaine Aston characterises the 2010s as a period defined by sustained feminist activism,[3] and undoubtedly the work of organisations such as Sphinx Theatre, Tonic Theatre, Act for Change, and ERA 50:50 was integral to the sea change in UK casting practices which defined the late 2010s. These lobbying organisations highlighted the paucity of roles for women across performance media in the UK and lobbied for change, their voices amplified in written works by high-profile performers such as Janet Suzman and Harriet Walter.[4] Their aims were twofold: to provide more employment opportunities for women performers and to provide better representation of women, beyond the figure of the ingénue.

Casting women as Shakespeare's men might be understood as a "resistant" casting practice, as it challenges the consignment of women to the figure of the love-interest and makes a wider range of roles available to them.[5] Elizabeth Klett suggests there are multiple reasons why women playing Shakespeare's men might be considered subversive:

> First, they disrupt mimetic theatrical production by rejecting the concept of theatre as a mirror that reflects reality. Instead, they reveal the theatre to be a laboratory where gender can be interrogated and dismantled. Second, they perform this disruption through the use of cross-gender casting, by placing a woman's body at the center of representation […]. Third, the actresses intervene in the play's performance traditions, and challenge conventional male-centred interpretations.[6]

Gemma Miller likewise suggests there is radical cultural potential in this casting approach, arguing that women playing Shakespeare's men "questions the 'authority' of the originating (male) author, it challenges the hegemony of male-dominated theatrical institutions; and it disrupts culturally embedded ideas of gender hierarchies."[7] On an artistic level, women playing male characters has the potential to channel the subversive potential of drag, whose "parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities."[8] Just as drag kings can "bring to light the artifice of dominant masculinity",[9] so women playing Shakespeare's men might provide a uniquely productive space for gender subversion. Indeed, in rendering the performativity of masculinity visible, women's gendered performance troubles the normative notion that "masculinity 'just is' whereas femininity reeks of the artificial".[10] Ultimately, by revealing the performativity of masculinity, the logic of the gender hierarchy and patriarchy itself can be called into question.

Yet, just as colourblind casting has been criticised as a form of assimilation which erases the lived experience of racism and perpetuates the myth of white, male genius, so casting women as Shakespeare's men might similarly be criticised for perpetuating the values of both the canonical and social status quo.[11] As Nora Williams has convincingly argued, "early modern

plays have misogyny baked in as an essential component of their dramaturgies" which "cannot be ameliorated by merely adding women to the cast".[12] Indeed, casting women in male roles could exacerbate the issue by rendering Shakespeare's misogynist dramaturgy palatable to a modern audience. Furthermore, as Imke Lichterfeld argues in this special edition, casting trends may reinforce negative gender stereotypes when women are cast in the roles of weak or indecisive leaders.[13]

This paper will argue that, while from an employment perspective, casting women in roles traditionally played as men undoubtedly serves a feminist agenda by creating more employment opportunities and securing greater career longevity for women performers, it does not have such straightforward artistic or dramaturgical outcomes. Indeed, apparently "progressive" casting might be just as much about saving Shakespeare as it is about promoting gender equality.[14] Central to my argument is that the outcomes of casting women in male roles can never be understood as inevitable: there is nothing inherently feminist or radical about the practice, nor is it inevitably reactionary. Instead, I argue that each casting decision must be carefully contextualised and critiqued in order to understand its dramaturgical significance in each specific production. To explore how women playing men might reinforce or subvert the gender ideology of a play, I will begin by exploring the significance of casting terminology before undertaking an analysis of the casting of Shakespeare's most misogynist play, *The Taming of the Shrew.* Focussing specifically on the casting of Petruchio, I will consider what it means for a woman to play a male agent of misogyny.

1. Casting, Meaning and Dramaturgy: Defining Key Terms

The nomenclature of casting is inherently unstable, and it is therefore important to define key terms before undertaking an analysis of casting's impact on performance. The meaning of performances will vary greatly depending on how the casting relates to the text; specifically, whether productions keep the pronouns of the text—commonly referred to as "cross-gender" casting—or whether productions alter the gender of a role so that the gender of the actor and character align. In-keeping with the broadly realist tradition that dominates UK stagings of Shakespeare, regendering is a popular approach. Andrew Hartley defines regendering as a practice in which roles are "played by women and as women, not by women impersonating men".[15] For example, Emma Rice's 2016 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* replaced Peter Quince with Rita Quince, a woman director with she/her pronouns. Altering the character's gendered identity to align with that of the actor facilitates a realist staging approach which "laminates body to character".[16] In contrast, "cross-gender" casting maintains the gap between actor and role with the gendered signifiers of the actor existing alongside the gendered signifiers of the character, disrupting realism's collapsing of actor and role. "Cross-gender" casting is often used interchangeably with "gender-blind" casting, though there is an important difference between a production in which spectators are encouraged to "see" the gap between actor and role and those in which they are encouraged to be "blind" to it. "Gender-blind" is a contested term which, like "colourblind" casting, implies "blindness to an actor's race [and gender] is not only desirable but also possible."[17] As well as arguably being an ableist term, "blind" casting is also something of a misnomer, as Miranda Fay Thomas has argued "if anything, an audience's awareness of gender is heightened when male actors are cast in traditionally female roles, and vice versa."[18]

Surveying the way in which these casting approaches create meaning in performance foregrounds the centrality of casting to a production's dramaturgy. The productions explored in this paper utilise "all-female", regendering, and gender-flipped approaches in their depiction of Petruchio. In an "all-female" production all characters are played by women, as in Jude Cristian's 2023 production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Regendering, as defined above, describes the altering of a character's gender to align with that of the actor, such as Simon Godwin's 2017 National Theatre production of *Twelfth Night* in which Tamsin Greig played Malvolia. While both "single-sex" and regendering approaches have a long theatrical history, more recently "gender-flipped" productions have become increasingly significant. In a gender-flipped production men play women and vice-versa. Gender-flipping may apply to selective pairs of roles, such as the roles of the Novice and Deputy in Josie Rourke's 2018 *Measure for Measure* at the Donmar Warehouse, or for the whole company, as in productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the RSC in 2014 and 2019. That there have been multiple gender-flipped productions of *The Shrew*, reflects the fact that casting is often seen as a creative means to grapple with this play's troubling gender politics.[19]

2. Casting Misogyny: Women Playing Petruchio

Ayanna Thompson suggests that *The Shrew* will always "resist rehabilitation and appropriation" in performance because of its "deep misogyny".[20] Understanding misogynistic hostility after Kate Manne as "anything that is suitable to serve a punitive, deterrent, or warning function" in "the enforcement and reestablishment of patriarchal order",[21] it is possible to see that *The Shrew*'s misogyny works on multiple levels. On the level of the plot, it dramatizes the punitive measures inflicted on those who challenge patriarchy and "enacts the defeat of the threat of a woman's revolt".[22] While on the level of the performance, it serves as a warning to its audience not to challenge patriarchal control. As Emily Detmer has convincingly asserted, Petruchio's behaviour should be understood as a form of domestic violence,[23] and as I have argued elsewhere, his use of isolation, starvation, and sleep-deprivation all correspond to a 21st century legal definition of coercive and controlling behaviour.[24] Casting has played an important role in attempts to both mitigate and problematise *The Shrew*'s misogyny, and women played Petruchio in three of the ten productions of the play staged at the RSC and Shakespeare's Globe between 2011 and 2020. It is noteworthy, however, that in each instance, this casting served a very different artistic agenda and scrutinising these performances foregrounds the complexity of meaning created when women play Shakespeare's men.

The three productions in which women played Petruchio had varied approaches to casting: Joe Murphy's 2013 touring production for Shakespeare's Globe featured an "all-female" cast, Michael Fentiman's 2014 First Encounter production for young audiences at the RSC was a gender-flipped and cross-gender cast production in which women played roles written as men and vice versa, while Justin Audibert's 2019 production was also gender-flipped, but in this case the roles were regendered and the world of *The Shrew* was reimagined as a matriarchy. Analysing the dramaturgical significance of casting in these productions foregrounds the multifarious meanings that can be created when women play Shakespeare's men.

3. A Single-Sex *Shrew*: Joe Murphy's 2013 All-Female Touring Production at Shakespeare's Globe

For Joe Murphy, his "all-female" cast provided:

> an opportunity just to play the play as the play. Because the most powerful argument against its misogyny is just to show its misogyny. It's very obvious that these eight intelligent, empowered women on stage are not condoning it. They're putting it on so you will be repulsed by it.[25]

In this respect, the production can be seen to align with a feminist agenda, defined by bell hooks as "the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression."[26] Casting was central to Murphy's critique of the play, as the gap between actor and role provided a space in which the play's misogyny could be questioned.

Murphy's staging of *The Shrew* offered a tragic interpretation of the play's central relationship. Initially, Katherine and Petruchio appeared to have potential as a couple; in Murphy's interpretation, "they actually seem quite good for each other [at first]", but ultimately "Petruchio is so ingrained in that patriarchal society, he has no concept of love other than obedience and ownership".[27] Petruchio's relationship with patriarchy appeared to be influenced by his own fragile masculinity; actor Leah Whitaker lent Petruchio a physically slight frame and observed in an interview that the character "doubts himself a lot".[28] To overcome his physical and emotional vulnerability and claim the patriarchal privilege to which he considered himself entitled, Whitaker's Petruchio self-consciously performed his masculine identity. Sporting jodhpurs, knee-high leather boots, and a hat with flying goggles, Whitaker's Petruchio dressed the part of the swaggering adventurer. Yet, the bravado of his recollection of past triumphs, "Have I not in my time heard lions roar?" (I.2.194),[29] sounded decidedly fanciful; Whitaker's Petruchio gave the impression that he felt the need to assert his masculine prowess through the recitation of former (or perhaps invented) acts of bravery. This assertion of macho dominance also manifested in the character's physicality, with the production making a running joke about the strength of Petruchio's handshake. Together, these aspects of characterisation implied Petruchio had a confidence in his God-given rights as a man living under patriarchy but was also profoundly anxious about his own masculine identity.

While these character choices would be available to an actor of any gender playing the role, the "all-female" casting lent an extra dimension to Petruchio's gender anxiety, as his earnest, self-conscious masculinity was juxtaposed with the more playful, hyperbolic masculine performances of the rest of the company. In this context, Whitaker's Petruchio was an anomaly, anxiously concerned with asserting his "natural" masculine authority, while the exaggerated performances of the rest of the company—Kathryn Hunt's Baptista in particular—concomitantly subverted the "naturalness" of the gender hierarchy by revealing masculinity's performativity. By rendering Petruchio an outlier, the production was able to play with gender roles while simultaneously committing to showing the abusive nature of his quest for dominance over Katherine. The taming plot was further complicated by the fact that Kate Lamb's Katherine was not the stereotypical shrew of the play's title. Lamb observed that "my Kate is not quite as angry

and feisty and sort of wantonly violent as perhaps other Kates have been".[30] As a result, more than one reviewer noted with discomfort that Petruchio's "treatment [of Katherine] seems both cruel and unnecessary".[31] In this respect, Murphy's company of women destabilised the comedic foundations of the play, for, as Emily Detmer has observed: "[t]o enjoy the comedy of the play, readers and viewers must work to see domestic violence from the point of view of an abuser—that is, they must minimalize the violence and, at the same time, justify its use".[32] Murphy's casting and staging choices worked to reveal the violence inherent in Shakespeare's comedy, while also subverting patriarchal gender codes.

For *Female Arts* blogger Madeline Moore, the casting worked particularly effectively with Shakespeare's text at the points where Petruchio asserted the logic of early modern patriarchy, as "when played by a woman, it doubly highlights the ridiculousness of his attitude".[33] Yet, I would argue that it was not simply Whitaker's gender identity that successfully alienated these words—after all, plenty of female-identifying performers have given an unironic delivery of Katherine's final speech, which articulates the same patriarchal logic of women's inferiority—rather, that the casting of the wiry Whitaker opposite Lamb's Katherine, her physical equal in height and build, served to disrupt the patriarchal logic of women's physical inferiority to men. Whitaker's physicality did not conform to the hyper-masculinity that is associated with male social dominance and in severing patriarchal power from the myth of male physical superiority Murphy's "all-female" casting helped to denaturalise male supremacy and successfully critiqued the misogynistic foundations of Shakespeare's play.

4. A Gender-Flipped *Shrew*: Michael Fentiman's Cross-Gender 2014 RSC First Encounter Production

If Murphy's production used women playing men to foreground *The Shrew's* misogyny, Michael Fentiman adopted a gender-flipped approach to casting in a bid to eschew the play's misogynist label:

> I hope this [casting] will help the production bring the emotional journey of the characters to the forefront, and allow a timeless story to emerge; a story about troubled, melancholic but ultimately joyful love, rather than the tale of abuse and misogyny that has made the play infamous.[34]

As with Murphy's production, in Fentiman's staging the gap between actor and role was integral to his directorial concept, but in this case it provided a space for playfulness, rather than critique. Fentiman's decision to "embrace [the cross-gender casting] here in a playful way"[35] was arguably influenced by his target audience: this was a First Encounters production, staged primarily for children aged 8-13.

In his bid to rehabilitate the play, Fentiman's staging presented a Petruchio who was less a patriarchal abuser and more a concerned educator, eager to teach Katherine how to be playful. Casting and design worked in tandem to establish play as central to the production's dramaturgy, with conflicting gender-signifiers playfully jostling alongside each other. Colin Richmond's "Moderbeathan" design foregrounded gender-play: the male actors wore early

modern dresses complete with full farthingales and elaborate ruffs, whilst also sporting beards, and the female actors wore 1950s-style suits. A metatheatrical substitute for the Sly framework further established the significance of costume in both creating and subverting gender: a mischievous stagehand called Claire switched the male and female costume trunks, leading the actors to don the "wrong" clothing. The audience witnessed a hurried conversation between Stephens and Forbes Masson—the actor playing Katherine—in which they agreed to swap roles. The reworked induction thus served to embed the gender-flipped, cross-gender casting in the production's dramaturgy, defining gender as a site of play and establishing a collaborative relationship between the actors playing Katherine and Petruchio.

The production's casting and design rendered identity an inherently theatrical phenomenon and in doing so, it implied that the rules of patriarchy could, and arguably should, be subverted. This was particularly evident in the staging of Katherine's troubling final speech. Stephens's Petruchio instructed his wife: "Katherina, that dress of yours becomes you not: / Off with that trifle, throw it under-foot",[36] at which Masson's Katherine began removing her dress, revealing grey tracksuit bottoms, an off-white t-shirt, and chunky black boots underneath. Stephens followed suit, revealing a plain t-shirt and leggings under her male attire. Having freed themselves of their gender-inscribed costuming, Katherine's speech on wifely duty—so rooted in clearly delineated gender roles—became an extension of the production's gender-play rather than an assertion of patriarchal logic. The fact that Katherine did not have a "soft and weak and smooth" body, but was played by a bearded, red-headed man with visible chest hair added a further element of play to *The Shrew*'s denouement. Thus, the casting, design, and staging worked together to destabilise the celebration of patriarchal norms in Shakespeare's text.

Whilst this playful approach might celebrate a liberation from the oppression of gender codes, it arguably implies that gender roles are something that an individual can shrug off, like an item of uncomfortable clothing. In doing so, the production uncoupled gender from the social "reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer", suggesting that individual agency is more powerful than social codes.[37] The production invested in the idea that Petruchio and Katherine are two quirky outsiders: as Stephens put it, this is a love story about "a pair of misfits finding each other".[38] This reading frames Petruchio's abuse of Katherine as a necessary part of her development and draws on a critical and theatrical tradition in which Petruchio's lessons liberate Katherine "from raging shrewishness [and] from compulsiveness and destructiveness"[39] by teaching her to play. Certainly, Masson's Katherine exhibited decidedly destructive tendencies, stomping about the stage and at one point mercilessly beating her sister with a riding crop. By the end of the play, Katherine's self-conscious performance of demure femininity implied that Petruchio had succeeded in teaching her that play might be more powerful than violence.

This is not to suggest that Petruchio was not violent—at one point he hit Grumio so hard in the mouth that his servant appeared to lose some teeth—but Stephens's physically slight Petruchio was not presented as a threat to Masson's broad, bearded Katherine, nor was he defined by macho bravado.[40] Like Whitaker, Stephens sought to connect with his vulnerable side and suggested that he is someone who "has been emotionally scarred by the trauma of the battlefield" and is "softer than we may imagine".[41] This translated into a softly-spoken Petruchio whose acts of coercive control were broadly framed as benevolent and who ultimately used his patriarchal privilege to liberate Katherine from the strictures of gender. In this way, Fentiman's staging arguably rehabilitated Shakespeare's play, using casting and play to maintain its comic impetus without celebrating its patriarchal logic.

5. A Regendered *Shrew*: Justin Audibert's 2019 Gender-Flipped RSC Production

Audibert set his gender-flipped regendering of *The Shrew* "an alternative or parallel version of the 1590s […in] a world where women are the dominant gender rather than men".[42] The rationale for this casting stemmed less from a clear directorial conceit and more from an experimental agenda, as he sought to answer the question: "if you reverse it and all the powerful people are women, how do you see the play?".[43] Yet, as the significant interpretative differences between Murphy and Fentiman's productions illustrate, "the play" is not a stable entity, and its gender politics can be understood on a spectrum from "comic and appealing" to "archaic and tragic".[44] Given "there can be *no* authoritative reading"[45] of *The Shrew* it arguably "demands a position on its sexual politics".[46] Yet Audibert's production appeared actively to avoid taking a clear position on the play's sexual politics, leaving the casting and gender-flipping as the primary dramaturgical intervention. In interviews, Audibert suggested that part of his rationale for the gender-flipped casting was that he didn't "think the world needs to see any more imagery of men abusing women",[47] which seems to acknowledge that Shakespeare's play depicts abuse. However, the production itself was ambivalent in its representation of the central relationship, showing the cruelty of Petruchio's "taming" methods, while also suggesting a mutual attraction between the pair.

Claire Price's quirky, oddball Petruchia was clearly immediately attracted to Joseph Arkley's Katherine, eyeing him approvingly when he entered in Act II, Scene 1. This wooing scene was notably more physical than Murphy and Fentiman's productions, with Petruchia holding Katherine in a prolonged chokehold and spinning him around stage in their first encounter. Yet despite this verbal and physical assault, when Petruchia called for Katherine's hand at the end of the scene, Katherine, to Petruchia's delight and surprise, gave it willingly. Despite Katherine's apparent attraction towards Petruchia, she did not spare him the brutality of the "taming" process. His hunger was depicted particularly vividly, when in Verona Arkley's Katherine kneeled to lick dregs from Hortensia's plate dressed only in a grubby shift. Yet despite the obvious cruelty of Petruchia's behaviour, reviewers frequently commented positively on the character, describing her as "captivatingly charismatic"[48] and suggesting that "[t]he appealing Price makes this tamer practical rather than spiteful and there is, interestingly, real love between the pair at the end".[49] That "real love" might be considered a possible outcome of coercive and controlling behaviour foregrounds how urgently this play needs to be interrogated in and through performance.

The matriarchal reimagining provided a particular opportunity to explore the commonly held idea—articulated in Katherine's final speech—that patriarchy is "natural" outcome of biology, as women "were [physically] too weak and men were too strong".[50] While many critics commented that it was disturbing to see a woman abuse a man, several struggled to appreciate why Arkley's Katherine accepted such treatment from a woman. For example, Peter Kirwan's discussion of the production suggests that because the tall Arkley might be able to physically dominate the shorter Price, "Audibert's production relied on Katherine's *self*-control, his reluctance to step too far out of the gender role ascribed to him by this society."[51] While a desire to adhere to gendered social codes may contribute to a survivor's decision to remain in an abusive relationship, it is the structural inequalities that shore up those social codes which are particularly powerful, denying survivors access to financial, legal, and practical support to leave abusive relationships.[52] In Audibert's production, these structural inequalities were represented

by a matriarchal power that legitimised the abuse of men. Such a twist on conventional power dynamics could have afforded a productive space for examining gender roles in both Shakespeare's play and in modern society. However, the idea that *The Shrew* is "a play about a very specific pair of people"[53] appeared to dominate the dramatic interpretation and resulted in a focus on inter-personal dynamics at the expense of an interrogation of social power relations.

Ayanna Thompson has observed a tendency in Shakespearean performance for "theatres [to] go middlebrow, middle road, and try and avoid controversy"[54] and Audibert's production might usefully be understood in these terms. In many ways, the recourse to gender-flipped and regendered casting enabled the production to side-step the play's challenges, couching the production in terms of experimentation and therefore eschewing interpretative responsibility. For some reviewers, Audibert's approach satisfactorily served both Shakespeare and modern sensibilities. Alexander Thom, for example, suggested that the production "excelled precisely by not attempting to fix the play, while equally refusing to leave it unquestioned".[55] Yet, this is to overlook Audibert's multiple interventions in the play's dramaturgy, including having Katherine fall for Petruchia and having Petruchia ultimately reject Katherine's proffered submission at the play's conclusion.[56] These micro "fixes" worked in tandem with the casting to mitigate the more extreme aspects of the play's power dynamics and saved the staging from the full patriarchal weight of the text.

Conclusion: Gender Fluid Casting

Elizabeth Klett has argued that "women's cross-gender performance can change our ideas about what gender and Shakespeare can or should look like".[57] Undoubtedly, these three productions used casting to shed new light on Shakespeare's most misogynist play, while also significantly augmenting the number of employment opportunities for women. Yet their ability to "change our ideas about what gender and Shakespeare can or should look like" ultimately depends on the dramaturgy of casting. While Murphy used women playing men to highlight *The Shrew*'s misogyny, in the case of Fentiman and Audibert's productions the gender-flipped casting rendered a shrew-taming narrative more acceptable for contemporary audiences. In this way, casting women as Shakespeare's men might be more concerned with saving Shakespeare than changing or challenging how we understand his works or interrogating gender roles in contemporary society. Indeed, the concept of "cross-gender" casting might shore up conservative notions of gender, as it relies on stable gender categories and reinforces the gender binary, suggesting a straightforward crossing from one gender to its "opposite", as opposed to recognising gender as both a spectrum and a social construct. This has consequences at both an employment and interpretative level, as it may limit work opportunities for non-binary or genderqueer actors, as well as inviting reductive critical assessments of the significance of gender in performance from critics, scholars, and audiences.

It may be more helpful to employ the term "gender-fluid" casting to casting practices where the gender of actor and character do not align. It is arguably a more inclusive term, as well as more accurately describing the dramatic phenomenon of gender in performance. "Gender-fluid" casting recognises that there will be frequent slippages in the reading of gender in performance: sometimes a spectator may simultaneously see a male character, a woman performer, a contemporary person, a Shakespearean character, a marked/unmarked body, whereas at other points in the performance just one of these identities may dominate reception. Given casting interventions look set to play an important role in the future of Shakespearean performance, conceptualising the meaning of casting in performance as something changeable

and fluid serves a valuable critical and creative function. Moving beyond the idea of "women playing men" the framework of "gender-fluid" casting recognises that casting alone cannot do the work of interventionalist dramaturgy, whilst acknowledging the important role casting can play in provoking critical reflection upon identity and its vital role in creating a more equitable employment landscape for performers.

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[1] Stephanie Tillotson, "From Gimmick Casting to Standard Practice: Re-gendering Shakespeare in Performance", in J. Paul Halferty and Cath Leeney (eds.), *Analysing Gender in Performance*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2022, p. 259.

[2] Sara Reimers, *Casting and the Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Performances of Shakespeare's Plays*, Ph.D. Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017, p. 84.

[3] Elaine Aston, "Agitating for Change: Theatre and a Feminist 'Network of Resistance'", *Theatre Research International*, vol. 41, n°1, 2016, p. 6.

[4] It is noteworthy that both Suzman and Walter reference Shakespeare's heroes in their book titles: *Not Hamlet* (2015) and *Brutus and Other Heroines* (2016) respectively.

[5] For more on "resistant" casting see Kirstin Smith (2020).

[6] Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and English National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 4-5.

[7] Gemma Miller, "Cross-Gender Casting as Feminist Interventions in the Staging of Early Modern Plays", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 16, n°1, 2014, p. 6

[8] Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York/London, Routledge, 1990, p. 174.

[9] Jack Halberstam, *Female masculinity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 266

[10] *Ibid*., p. 234.

[11] For more on the problems with colourblind casting see: Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, race, and contemporary America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

[12] Nora J. Williams, "Incomplete Dramaturgies", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 40, n°1, 2022, p. 2, p. 5.

[13] See Imke Lichterfeld "Gender changes and the weak-queen dilemma", *Shakespeare en devenir*, n°18.

[14] For more on the tension between saving Shakespeare and pursuing a social justice agenda see: David Sterling Brown and Sandra Young, "(Un)Just Acts: Shakespeare and Social Justice in Contemporary Performance", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 39, n°4, 2021, p. 529-535.

[15]Andrew James Hartley, "Prospera's Brave New World: Cross-Cast Oppression and the Four-fold Player in the Georgia Shakespeare Festival Tempest", in James Bulman (ed.), *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, Cranbury (NJ), Associated University Presses, 2008, p. 131.

[16] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*, New York/London, Routledge, 1997, p. 52.

[17] Ayanna Thompson, "Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting", in Ayanna Thompson (ed.), *Colorblind Shakespeare*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 6.

[18] Miranda Fay Thomas, "Re-defining the Shakespearean Actor: Casting and Diversity and Shakespeare's Globe under Emma Rice and Michelle Terry", *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, n°31, 2021, p. 6.

[19] In addition to the two gender-flipped productions at the RSC (2014 and 2019), there were two additional gender-flipped productions in the UK in the late 2010s: Rae McKen's production for Custom Practice (Above the Arts Theatre, London, 2016) and Jo Clifford's production for the Sherman Theatre (Cardiff, 2019).

[20] Ayanna Thompson, "*All That Glisters*", *NPR*. **URL**. Accessed 1 May 2023.

[21] Kate Manne, *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*, London, Penguin, 2017, p. 68, p. 69.

[22] Penny Gay, *As she likes it: Shakespeare's unruly women*, New York/London, Routledge, 1994, p. 86.

[23] Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and *The Taming of the Shrew*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 48, n°3, 1997, p. 28

[24] Sara Reimers, "From Theory to Action: Staging a Feminist Production of *The Taming of the Shrew*", *Shakespeare*, vol. 20, n°2, 2024, p. 272.

[25] Quoted in Peter Crawley, "Making a Merry Jest of *Shrew's* Misogyny", *Irish Times*, 6 July 2013. **URL**. Accessed 27 April 2023.

[26] bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 33.

[27] Quoted in Peter Crawley, *op. cit*.

[28] IMAGINETV NETWORK, *Taming Of The Shrew (Shakespeare's Globe) - Leah Whitaker as Petruchio*, 9 November 2013. **URL**. Accessed 17 August 2024.

[29] William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Ann Thompson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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[31] Mary Tapper, *The Taming of the Shrew—Oxford Playhouse @ Bodleian*. **URL**. Accessed 28 August 2013.

[32] Emily Detmer, *op. cit*., p. 274.

[33] Madeline Moore, "*The Taming of the Shrew*—theatre review", *Female Arts*. **URL**. Accessed 28 August 2013.

[34] Michael Fentiman, "Q&A with the Director", *First Encounter Teachers' Pack: The Taming of the Shrew*. **URL**. Accessed 27 April 2023.

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] A recording of this production is available to view at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

[37] Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 234.

[38] Quoted in Dan Hutton, "The Tamer Tamed?", *Exeunt*, 3 February 2014. **URL**. Accessed 27 April 2023.

[39] Peter Saccio, "Shrewd and Kindly Farce", *Shakespeare Survey,* vol. 37, 1984, p. 37.

[40] It is noteworthy that the pair were never violent towards each other: instead of hitting Petruchio in Act II, Scene 1, Katherine blew a prolonged raspberry in his face. This choice ensured that the moment was not ghosted by patriarchal violence: if Katherine hit Petruchio in this casting configuration, the audience would simultaneously see a female character hitting a male character and a male actor hitting a female actor.

[41] Quoted in Dan Hutton, *op. cit.*

[42] RSC, *In a reimagined 1590.* **URL**. Accessed 3 May 2023.

[43] Quoted in Terri Paddock, "*The Taming of the Shrew* in the Age of #MeToo," *Facebook*, 29 April 2019. **URL**. Accessed 2 May 2023. It is noteworthy that three professional productions had already explored this question in the five years prior to Audibert's production, but lacking the prestige of a mainstage production and tour for the RSC, perhaps Audibert did not consider their findings conclusive.

[44] Anna Kamaralli, S*hakespeare and the Shrew: Performing the Defiant Female Voice*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2012, p. 91.

[45] Quoted in Michael Shapiro, "Framing the Taming: Metatheatrical Awareness of Female Impersonation in *The Taming of the Shrew*", *The Yearbook of English Studies,* vol. 23, 1993, p. 143.

[46] Anna Kamaralli, *op. cit*., p. 91.

[47] Quoted in Peter Kirwan, *op. cit*., p. 136.

[48] Ella Hawkins, "Review of *The Taming of the Shrew* dir. by Justin Audibert", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 38, n°1, 2020, p. 158.

[49] Fiona Mountford, "*The Taming of the Shrew* Review: Landmark Production as Women Take Charge", *The Evening Standard*, 12 June 2019. **URL**. Accessed 31 March 2024.

[50] Angela Saini, *The Patriarchs: How Men Came to Rule*, London, 4th Estate, 2023, p. 4

[51] Peter Kirwan, *op. cit*., p. 137

[52] For more on the barriers to leaving an abusive relationship see: Daniel G. Saunders, "Barriers to leaving an abusive relationship", in Robert Geffner, Jacquelyn W. White, L. Kevin Hamberger, Alan Rosenbaum, Viola Vaughan-Eden and Victor I. Vieth (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: A Project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan (NPEIV)*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2021, p. 2841-2863.

[53] Shakespeare for All, *Playing Petruchia at the RSC — an Interview with Claire Price*. **URL**. Accessed 17 August 2024.

[54] David Sterling Brown, "'Unicorns and Fairy Dust': Talking Shakespeare, Performance, and Social (In)Justice with Ayanna Thompson and Farah Karim-Cooper", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 39, n°4, 2021, p. 542.

[55] Alexander Thom, "Review of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (directed by Justin Audibert for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 5 April 2019", *Shakespeare*, vol. 15, n°4, 2019, p. 428.

[56] Shakespeare's text leaves Petruchio's response ambiguous, but the related anonymous text, *The Taming of a Shrew*, includes a stage direction which overtly states that Katherine submits.

[57] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 167.

Sara Reimers

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

“On Mere Necessity”: Gender-Bending — From Pragmatical Solution to Ideological Undertaking

Par Kiki Lindell Tersmeden
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ABSTRACT

Back in 2002, one of the first Shakespeare plays that I directed with a cast of undergraduate university students (as part of a long-standing elective course called "Drama in Practice — Shakespeare on Stage", involving analysing, lecturing and writing on, rehearsing and finally performing a play, in full period costume, before an audience) was *Love's Labour's Lost*. As fate (and COVID) would have it, exactly twenty years later, in 2022, I tackled the same play again, with a cast of students nearly a quarter-of-a-century younger than the previous lot. Through the written work required from the students along the way, it is possible to trace their development and immediate insights while the course work is on-going, but even more interestingly, it is also possible to catch sight of long-term changes in student response to Shakespeare, and in the way the students perceive themselves in relation to the plays. One such long-term shift has to do with cross-dressing and the significance of gender on stage; it seems to me that the students' reactions to playing fast and loose with gender have changed considerably in some ways, while staying the same in others. For a Renaissance actor, the concept of acting gender would have been nothing out of the ordinary, of course; my students, on the other hand, have to take on board multiple meanings of the concept of gender, balancing working under similar conditions to those of a Renaissance playing company (learning from the inside, as it were) against shifting attitudes to gender in our own time. Using examples from several "Drama in Practice — Shakespeare on Stage" productions, bookended by the 2002 and 2022 productions of *Love's Labour's Lost*, I want to explore this shift, and its results on stage.

KEYWORDS

acting gender, re-gendering, cross-gender casting, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare in Performance, Shakespeare in Education

RÉSUMÉ

En 2002, l'une des premières pièces que j'ai montée avec une distribution d'étudiants de première et deuxième années d'université (faisant partie d'une option établie depuis longtemps intitulée "Pratique théâtrale — Shakespeare à la scène", qui consistait en analyses, cours, travaux écrits, répétitions et enfin mise en scène d'une pièce en costumes historiques devant un auditoire) était *Peine amour perdue*. Le sort (et le COVID) a voulu que, exactement vingt ans plus tard, en 2022, je reprenne la même pièce, avec une distribution d'étudiants un quart de siècle plus jeune que la précédente. À travers les écrits que les étudiants doivent produire au cours de ce travail, il est possible d'identifier leur développement et leurs réflexions spontanées et, plus intéressant encore, il est aussi possible de percevoir des modifications à long terme de leurs réactions vis-à-vis de Shakespeare et de la façon dont les étudiants se perçoivent par rapport aux pièces. Un changement à long terme concerne le travestissement et la signification du genre à la scène. Il me semble que la réaction des étudiants de prendre le genre à la légère a changé considérablement et, en même temps, est resté semblable. Pour un acteur de la Renaissance anglaise, le concept de genre théâtral n'aurait rien eu d'extraordinaire, bien sûr. En revanche, mes étudiants ont à intégrer de multiples facettes du concept de genre, hésitant entre adopter des conditions similaires aux acteurs d'une compagnie théâtrale renaissante (en apprenant de l'intérieur pour ainsi dire) et des attitudes changeantes en ce qui concerne le genre, de nos jours. En utilisant des exemples de diverses mises en scène issues de ce cours,

encadrées par les représentations de *Peine d'amour perdue* de 2002 et de 2022, je souhaite explorer ce changement et ses conséquences scéniques.

MOTS-CLÉS

le genre du rôle, changement de genre, distribution féminine, *Peine d'amour perdue*, *La Nuit des Rois*, *La Tempête*, Shakespeare à la scène, Shakespeare et l'enseignement

"For, ladies, we shall every one be mask'd"
(*Love's Labour's Lost*, Act V, Scene 2)

Back in 2002, one of the first Shakespeare plays that I directed with a cast of undergraduate university students (as part of a long-standing elective course called "Drama in Practice — Shakespeare on Stage", involving analysing, lecturing and writing on, rehearsing and finally performing a Shakespeare play, in English, in period costume, before an audience) was *Love's Labour's Lost*. As fate (and COVID) would have it, exactly twenty years later, in 2022, I tackled the same play again, with a cast of students nearly a quarter-of-a-century younger than the previous lot.

This elective course, with its full-on performance, and the hands-on work with the play that goes before, is always engrossing, exhausting and enjoyable in equal measure, and surprisingly often it yields substantial food for thought; as anyone who works with Shakespeare in practice knows, seeing the plays through the fresh young eyes of one's students almost always proves a way of discovering brave new worlds within it. While the performance constitutes the students "oral exam", the actual grading of the course is based on their written work. The seven papers produced by every student (the contents of which will typically be part scholarly analysis, part diary or work-log) always make fascinating reading. Through these, it is possible to trace their development and immediate insights while the work is ongoing, but even more interestingly, occasionally it is also possible to catch sight of long-term changes in student response to Shakespeare, and in the way the students perceive themselves in relation to the plays.

One such long-term shift has to do with cross-dressing and the significance of gender on stage; it seems to me that the students' reactions to playing fast and loose with gender have changed considerably in some ways, while staying the same in others. For a Renaissance actor, the concept of acting gender would have been nothing out of the ordinary, of course; all in a day's work, whether or not you have a beard coming. My students, on the other hand, have to take on board multiple meanings of the concept of gender, and actually experience working under similar conditions to those of a Renaissance playing company (learning from the inside, as it were), at the same time balancing this against shifting attitudes to gender in our own time.

Using examples from several "Drama in Practice — Shakespeare on Stage" productions, bookended by the 2002 and 2022 productions of *Love's Labour's Lost,* I want to explore this attitude shift, and its effect on stage.[1]

Throughout my time in this our academic world of words, words, words, I have retained an instinctive belief that Shakespeare's plays, written as they are to be performed on a stage, should be seen and listened to, and not *just* read as text (although we, as academics, must do that as well, of course). Contenting oneself with silently perusing the score of a Mozart opera and declaring that there is no need to actually listen to the music (or indeed see the work on stage) would be considered bizarre for a student of music; similarly, in order for students of literature to have a chance to savour the full potential of Shakespeare's plays, those plays must be allowed to come alive, and shout, whisper and sing out loud on the stage.

The "on mere necessity" in the title of this paper is of course a line from *Love's Labour's Lost* (I.1.146), and there is certainly a very strong element of necessity and pragmatism in the casting as it is done in this course, since, rather than audition individuals to form a group, the brief is to

accommodate the cast I already have (rather like Shakespeare himself, come to think about it). This cast consists of the students who have chosen this elective course (whether it is a "happy few" or a "rude multitude", and whether there is a male or female bias). Hence, cross-gender casting and re-gendering has always been a feature in the class-room-as-rehearsal-room, independent of the increase in these practices on professional stages. The gender choices I make tend to be practical rather than ideological; however, sometimes, a choice made for pragmatic reasons may end up bringing something new and exciting to the staging, in the intimate space created between the rehearsals, the students' papers and the lectures.

Twenty years ago, casting was always the art of the impossible, based as it was on an impossible equation: while Shakespeare's plays tend to have a strong male bias (hardly surprising, seeing that he wrote for an all-male cast), most amateur stage productions seem to draw a greater number of female than male participants—on top of which, in our subject, English, there is usually a female bias in the student cohorts. In the casting process, my aim is to follow the students' own wishes as far as possible; in doing this, I soon discovered that my female students were nearly always insecure about being cross-cast. They would grit their teeth and accept the casting, and then, once they had begun to love the part they *got* (as they invariably do), and trust me, they would tell me of their initial reaction, which often had been something along the lines of: "Oh no! Does Kiki think I look like a boy?" On the other hand, the female students were mostly happy playing re-gendered characters; hence, occasionally the difficulties could be resolved that way.

For these reasons, *Love's Labour's Lost* was among the very first plays I chose for this course:[2] out of the sixteen characters, there were five good, "young" female parts, roughly equal in size, plus (in those early days before I began making historical costumes for the plays, thereby committing us to historicity) there were three more that could be believably re-gendered (the French lord Boyet becoming Boyette the chaperone, and the schoolmaster Holofernes played as his female counterpart Holofernia) or even *de*-gendered (Moth the page became a little scrubby urchin of indeterminate sex, sporting a sailor suit with skorts). For a group with the strongest female bias in the course's twenty-year history (only three out of sixteen students were male—roughly one fifth of the group), the ratio eight male parts to eight (possibly) female ones was still not ideal, but much better than where we started, and ultimately, everyone was happy with their part.

Another early example of re-gendering to resolve a casting problem occurred the year after *Love's Labour's Lost* (when we were rehearsing our first production in historical costume, *Twelfth Night*); only, this time, the gender-bending itself gave food for thought to our staging. The girl cast as Antonio confessed to being uncomfortable playing a man; thus, my first mission became to negotiate a way of playing Antonio the man as Antonia the woman without making her into a sort of Roaring Girl, foregrounded for her gender-bending qualities. We wanted an Antonia that didn't pop out of the plot but still occupied the same space and could retain the same function and relative status. For instance, whereas Antonio the man draws a sword in Viola's defence (in 3,4), Antonia the woman could hardly be expected to possess such a weapon, let alone know how to wield it. However, it is also possible to see Antonio as never so much bent on defiance and fight as on *self-sacrifice*; he is ready to die for his friend, and this spirit of martyrdom could fit a woman as well as a man. We experimented with the scene, and ended up having Antonia throw herself between the Guards and Viola, ready to take the blow on herself, and letting her very womanhood be a plea to the enemy for mercy and mildness.

Transforming Antonio into Antonia also meant introducing another problem: without actually throwing ourselves into full swashbuckling *Pirates of the Caribbean* mode, à la Anne Bonny and Mary Read, we could not very well let our Antonia be wanted for piracy. Thus, we had to find a different reason why she is *persona non grata* in Orsino's capital. I was reading Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* at the time, and I got thinking about what would enrage Stubbes, and the Puritans of Illyria, most. The answer to that question was easy: to let Antonia be what Stubbes calls a "lewd and incontinent Harlotte".[3] This is Stubbes in full form on this subject:

> I would wish that the / woman who [is] / known / to have committed the horrible act of whordom /, either should / taste of present death / or else, if *that* be thought too severe /, then would God they might be cauterised and seared with a hot iron on the cheek, forehead, or some other part of their body that might be seen, to the end the honest and chaste Christians might be discerned from the adulterous children of Satan.[4]

Here was the death-penalty and the visible shaming, brought together, all in one sentence, ready for us to use in our staging. And no, we did not go so far as to actually brand the poor student with a hot iron—but as a nod to Stubbes, and to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, I did give her a badge of shame, to hide as best she could under her cloak: a richly embroidered red A for Adultery, sewn onto the bodice of her dress. On stage, we discovered that in one sense, the imagined prostitute background actually made Antonia's plight even more poignant than that of Antonio the man. She was a woman, once trusting and innocent perhaps, now hardened by the life of a harlot. Against her better judgment, she had allowed herself to be vulnerable to Sebastian; it followed that hers was the bitterness of one who has learned the hard way to distrust all mankind—then loves and trusts *one* man, and is betrayed by him.

Thus, regendering (though undertaken pragmatically, to avoid cross-casting) may prove an asset in itself, providing a door into a character's motivations, a peg to hang an interpretation on, or simply a way of understanding that Shakespeare's plays are forged of the same metal as those two souls of John Donne's that "endure not … a breach, but an expansion, like gold to airy thinness beat". In other words, the plays can withstand much beating, twisting, manhandling (or 'woman-handling', as the case may be), pulling apart and putting together again, and still remain solid gold.

Incidentally, some ten years after that first *Twelfth Night* production, there was another where cross-casting was no longer an issue. In 2015, an exchange student had an emergency back home and was forced to abandon the play and leave Sweden early; he had been doubling as Antonio and Maria, and we now needed a quick replacement for him. I sent out an emergency plea among previous players and very quickly, the "Juliet" and "Tybalt" of a recent *Romeo and Juliet* stepped in and saved the day. I had taken for granted that "Juliet" would be Maria and "Tybalt" Antonio, but they had had a little pow-wow and confronted me with *fait accompli*: "Tybalt" would be Maria, and "Juliet" Antonio, not the other way round. I still do not know who the initiative for the gender swap came from, but it was a huge success: "Antonio" took great pains to thwart the luminous beauty that had suited Juliet so well with the grizzled beard and body-language of an aged man and was a deeply moving old Antonio. And "Maria" combined a three-day stubble with a fetching little cap, a pair of much-coveted earrings, and a mischievous grin that had us all in stitches.



1. “Tybalt” and “Juliet” became Maria and Antonio—not Antonio and Maria.
Crédits. Mikael Bornemark.

But what about the male students, then, twenty years ago? Well, I was initially surprised—and possibly this says more about my own preconceived notions than about the students—to find that in stark contrast to their female counterparts, the male students tended to be much more keen to be cross-cast, keen to wear dresses, wigs and finery. (Curiously, though, I soon discovered that there was a pattern to this: they were more than delighted to play a female part, provided that it was small enough to involve doubling with a butch safety-blanket in the shape of a male character.) I also quickly discovered that for most male students playing female roles, there is initially a strong temptation to stray into very loud and expansive Panto Dame territory, playing characters considerably larger than life.[5] Forever in my memory is a very tall, masculine Audrey (in *As You Like It)* who, with very little nudging, worked out how to combine and contrast his Audrey’s Dame Edna looks with a more gentle stage persona which, bizarrely, seemed to harbour the idea of herself as a sweet, timid little thing; the result was very possibly the funniest, most touching Audrey I have ever seen. And the Panto Dame still has a tendency to emerge; ten years after *As You Like It*, there was a *Merchant of Venice* for which (again, in order to increase the number of female parts) I had re-gendered the Doge, making him a Queen Elizabeth I-like figure, in a gown vaguely reminiscent of the Ditchley portrait. For various reasons, this part ended up in the hands of a male student, who was very much given to loud clowning around, playing for laughs, both on and off stage. Together, we worked out a body language to make this character command instant respect in the Court scene. I instructed him to be as physically still as possible, especially as regards his hands: we made a rule that whenever he made a gesture, it had to *mean* something, for everyone would be intent on following his orders. After a couple of attempts, this note clicked with him; he found stillness and poise, and through that suddenly exuded quiet authority—yet all the while unmistakeably female.[6]



2. The Doge/Queen—exuding quiet authority.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.

In the beginning of this paper, I stated that *Love's Labour's Lost* was chosen as "my" second play because of its convenient number of female parts. I should add that among the plays read and discarded by me in favour of *Love's Labour's Lost* was *The Tempest*—there were (I felt) too few female characters, and I did not see how we could make it work on stage. Hence, in a sense, this paper is also the story of *my own* changing attitudes; the play that seemed impossible in 2002, was in fact the play that immediately preceded the 2022 *Love's Labour's Lost*. We did two *Tempest* courses-cum-productions back-to-back, and this time, we played with gender (and costume) too, just for the fun of it. The first, outdoor, *Tempest* had a female student as Caliban (a hissing, silvery lizard-creature, sea-changed, coral-fingered, frightening, independent and barely under control) and a male student playing a joyful Ariel with a butterfly coronet and small green transparent wings, always climbing trees and watching from the sidelines; there was real affection between him and Prospero.



3. Outdoor Tempest female Caliban—Stephano.
Crédits. Olivia Aherne.



4. Outdoor Tempest male Ariel—Prospero.
Crédits. Olivia Aherne.

The second *Tempest* took place indoors and had a more sombre mood, and here, the roles were reversed: Caliban was played by a male student as a grumpy, crouching, moody fish-boy, with silvery fins on his back and moss and leaves on his front. He had a teenager's explosive hate-love relationship with his "father" Prospero; by contrast, the female Ariel of this production, beautiful in white, with wings that lit up when she was happy or excited, was clearly frightened of Prospero, the light of her wings flickering when he scolded her. These four could not have been any more different from each other—yet both these Ariels, both these Calibans were fascinating and believable in their own way; looking back, I think of them as four shades of the supernatural, a third gender if you like.[7]



5. Indoor Tempest: male Caliban.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.



6. Indoor Tempest: female Ariel with Miranda.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.

7 a) and b). Antonio and Sebastian, plotting to get the Neapolitan crown:



a) Mean guys outdoors.
Crédits. Photo Olivia Aherne.



b) Mean girls indoors.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.

Returning once more to *Love's Labour's Lost*, in 2002, I chose this play for the "Drama in Practice" course because of its many female (and young) characters. I would never do that today; for one

thing, times have changed, and there seems to be far less of a female bias in the groups these days. I have also learned to trust that Shakespeare's plays are strong enough to carry us and other amateurs through; even a light, frothy one like *Love's Labour's Lost*. When I chose this play again for the 2022 course, I did so out of curiosity: what would have changed, for me (with infinitely more staging experience than twenty years earlier) and for a new generation of students? Well, one thing that had changed was that this time, I had a cast that was almost two thirds male; for this reason too—but not *only* for this reason—there was a great deal of cross-gender casting. Particularly memorable was a male Jaquenetta (a tall, gentle, rather shy boy, who came into his own as a saucy minx), a female Holofernes, and a male Maria, who, despite a very deep voice (and doubling as Costard), was utterly convincing as a sweet, ditzy girl, sharing secrets and confidences with an equally ditzy Katherine, oblivious of the state business and plotting of the sharp-witted Rosaline and the Princess.



8. Cross-gender doubling: Costard/AA/Jaquenetta.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.



9. Maria and Katherine.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.



10. Final.
Crédits. Kiki Lindell Tersmeden.

What began as entirely pragmatic re-gendering and cross-gender casting, these days has a purpose in itself: this way students, male or female, get to inhabit the opposite gender, different ages and stances, playing with, or against—or simply having fun with—gender stereotypes. Thus, over the twenty-odd years I have been teaching “Drama in Practice”, cross-casting has developed from the “mere necessity” of the early years into “something rich and strange” (to

quote *The Tempest* yet again): Shakespeare helps the students walk in each other's shoes, be intrepid explorers of the universe of the opposite sex.

Casting beyond gender-divisions is more interesting now than it ever was. We are always told that new generations tend to perceive gender as more fluid; however, I believe that the reason cross-casting and re-gendering often yields interesting results is not because to these young people there is no gender—but because there *is*, and they are willing to go forth and play against it, experiment, in the process finding worlds both rich, strange, and entirely their own.

Notes

[1] As a pre-emptive apology, I should stress that this my own non-professional experience with these amateur productions says nothing about Swedish theatre practice in general; also, that my observations are not just about actresses playing male characters but also about male actors in female roles.

[2] "My" first play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was chosen for the same reasons: it has several good female parts already, in addition to which we invoked and leaned on the long-standing tradition, in Sweden and elsewhere, of the fairies being played by female actors. Incidentally, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be said to encompass an important chunk of Swedish theatre history: In the year 1900, the young actress Harriet Bosse played Puck; August Strindberg was in the audience, was entranced, and famously asked her afterwards, "Would you like to have a little baby with me, Miss Bosse?" Within a year they were married (and within another three, they were divorced again—and yes, there was a little daughter, Anne-Marie). More than four decades later, in 1941, the young Ingmar Bergman (just beginning his career) directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and for the first time in the play's eighty years in Sweden, the part of Puck was played, not by a woman, but by a 12-year-old boy, Bengt Dalunde. This was also the last *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that had a female Oberon; thus, the production simultaneously ended one tradition (that of having a female Puck) and gave room for a new one (having a male Oberon).

[3] Phillip Stubbes's *Anatomie of Abuses in England in Shakspere's Youth, A.D. 1583,* edited by Frederick J. Furnivall (publisht for The New Shakspere Society, London, Bungay [printed], 1877-9), p. 89.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 99.

[5] Men claim space, and women give it to them; this phenomenon still stays the same, I find. I particularly remember one occasion with a female-dominated group in a fairly small rehearsal room. The students were asked, all of them, to walk like women; then stop, and then start walking like men—and within seconds, we all literally *saw* the classroom become too small. A very useful exercise in gender behaviour and gender expectations; not only do men tend to take a larger personal space for granted, but women also obviously expect them to do so, *and* automatically do the same when they try to adopt a male body language.

[6] This, too, in spite of having a big, luxurious, black beard; he had asked whether I wanted him to shave it off, but once he found his inner, quiet authority, there was no need to even consider making concessions like that. I gave him another note: nobody will ever dare question the

Queen; they might wonder, but if your stance is a calm "Yes, I'm a Queen with a beard. Moving on", this will be a non-issue, for the Court and for the audience. And indeed, it was.

[7] A footnote to the footnote about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, chosen by me for its "female" fairies: when I revisited the play for yet another production, a dozen years after the first, we did in fact have a male student playing Oberon (and a female student playing Flute, probably the least cross-cast of all the tradesmen; in this production, he was a little apprentice boy, and his line "I have a beard coming" was very clearly wishful thinking).

Kiki Lindell Tersmeden

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Hamlet, Thy Name Is Woman: Cross-Gendered Casting in Antonio Latella's *Hamlet* (2021)

Par Francesca Forlini
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ABSTRACT

Theatre is hardly new to cross-gender casting. The tradition of men portraying women on public stages dates back to Greek drama: men played female roles in the playhouses of Shakespeare's London and Japanese Kabuki. In recent centuries, the idea of switching the gender of parts in either direction when reviving Shakespearean plays has continuously come in and out of fashion. Cross-gender casting experienced a boom in the Anglophone world in the 1890s, with actresses like Sarah Bernhardt claiming their right to Olympian roles like Hamlet, a tradition most recently added to by Maxine Peake (2014), Tessa Parr (2019), Michelle Terry (2018) and Cush Jumbo (2020). Embracing this practice with cautious enthusiasm, contemporary Italian theatre has recently opened up to cross-gendered casting and to its capacity to illuminate and problematize specific aspects of the text performed. This is the case for Antonio Latella's *Hamlet*, staged at Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato in 2021. Defying the performing conventions traditionally associated with the role, this production featured a young she-Hamlet, played by Federica Rosellini. As Latella articulates, by transcending gender binaries, the unconventionality of this casting choice was originally designed to urge audiences to engage with the text on a deeper level. However, the timely staging of the production during the wave of mobilisation that shook the cultural and creative sectors following the diffusion of the international feminist movements of #metoo and #metootheatre significantly affected the reception of this casting choice. Focusing on the ways in which Latella's *Hamlet* resonated with Italian audiences and critics, this article contributes to the debates around the use of cross-gendered casting in the reviving of Shakespearean plays within the context of women's struggle for equality. On the one hand, it offers a perspective on the gender imbalances that affect the Italian theatre sector, and on the other hand, it considers the potential of Latella's production in promoting social change.

KEYWORDS

cross-gender casting, gender representation, William Shakespeare, Antonio Latella, contemporary Italian theatre

RÉSUMÉ

Le théâtre n'est pas étranger aux rôles travestis. La tradition des hommes incarnant des rôles féminins remonte au théâtre grec : les hommes jouaient des rôles de femmes dans les théâtres de Londres à l'époque de Shakespeare et dans le Kabuki japonais. Au cours des derniers siècles, l'idée de changer le genre des rôles lors des reprises des pièces de Shakespeare a connu des hauts et des bas. Les rôles travestis ont connu un essor dans le monde anglophone dans les années 1990, avec des actrices comme Sarah Bernhardt revendiquant leur droit à des rôles prestigieux tels que Hamlet, une tradition récemment perpétuée par Maxine Peake (2014), Tessa Parr (2019), Michelle Terry (2018) et Cush Jumbo (2020). Adoptant cette pratique avec un enthousiasme mesuré, le théâtre contemporain italien s'est récemment ouvert aux rôles travestis et à leur capacité à éclairer et à questionner certains aspects du texte interprété. C'est le cas de l'*Hamlet* d'Antonio Latella, mis en scène au Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato en 2021. Défiant les conventions traditionnelles associées au rôle, cette production présentait une jeune Hamlet féminine, interprétée par Federica Rosellini. Comme l'explique Latella, en transcendant les binarités de genre, ce choix de casting original visait à encourager le public à se rapporter

plus profondément au texte. Cependant, la mise en scène de la production pendant la vague de mobilisation qui a secoué les secteurs culturels et créatifs suite aux mouvements féministes internationaux #metoo et #metootheatre a considérablement influencé la réception de ce choix de casting. En se concentrant sur la manière dont l'*Hamlet* de Latella a résonné auprès du public et des critiques italiens, cet article contribue aux débats sur l'utilisation des rôles travestis dans les reprises des pièces de Shakespeare dans le contexte de la lutte des femmes pour l'égalité. D'une part, il offre une perspective sur les déséquilibres de genre qui affectent le secteur théâtral italien, et d'autre part, il examine le potentiel de la production de Latella à promouvoir un changement social.

MOTS-CLÉS

rôles travestis, représentation de genre, William Shakespeare, Antonio Latella, théâtre italien contemporain

Introduction

Theatre is hardly new to cross-gender casting. The tradition of men portraying women on public stages dates back to Greek drama: men played female roles in the playhouses of Shakespeare's London and Japanese Kabuki. In recent centuries, the idea of switching the gender of parts in either direction when reviving Shakespearean plays has continuously come in and out of fashion. Cross-gender casting experienced a boom in the Anglophone world in the 1990s, with actresses like Sarah Bernhardt claiming their right to Olympian roles like Hamlet, a tradition most recently added to by Maxine Peake (2014), Tessa Parr (2019), Michelle Terry (2018) and Cush Jumbo (2020).[1]

Embracing this practice with cautious enthusiasm, contemporary Italian theatre has recently opened up to cross-gendered casting and to its capacity to illuminate and problematize specific aspects of the text performed. This is the case for Antonio Latella's *Hamlet*, staged at Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato in 2021. Defying the performing conventions traditionally associated with the role, this production featured a young she-Hamlet, played by Federica Rosellini. As Latella articulates, by transcending gender binaries, the unconventionality of this casting choice was originally designed to urge audiences to engage with the text on a deeper level: "For me, the Hamlet of the 21st century goes beyond sexuality, beyond the distinction between woman and man […]: in the classics, the words have no genitals, they are of such a higher level as to make a difference".[2] However, the timely staging of the production during the wave of mobilisation that shook the cultural and creative sectors following the diffusion of the international feminist movements of #metoo and #metootheatre significantly affected the reception of this casting choice.

Focusing on the ways in which Latella's *Hamlet* resonated with Italian audiences and critics, this article contributes to the debates around the use of cross-gendered casting in the reviving of Shakespearean plays within the context of women's struggle for equality. On the one hand, it offers a perspective on the gender imbalances that affect the Italian theatre sector, and on the other hand, it considers the potential of Latella's production in promoting social change.

1. Women in Italian theatre: the rise of Amleta, a platform for change

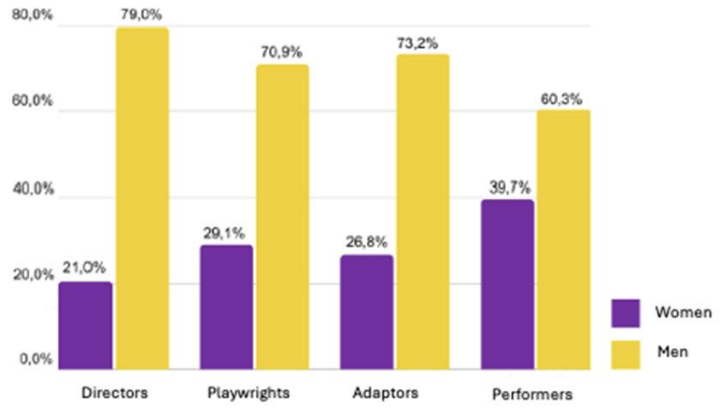
Performing artists and cultural workers played a crucial role in the radical mobilisation that shook the Italian creative sector between 2011 and 2016, with activities located in occupied spaces such as Macao in Milan and Teatro Valle in Rome.[3] Despite collective reflections on workplace inequalities stemming from these experiences, Italian theatre has been slow to address power imbalances connected to gender. Significantly, the first systematic attempt to map gender inequalities in the Italian theatre sector dates back to 2017, a landmark year that witnessed countless of women joining the #metoo movement and turning to social media to denounce sexual harassment in the entertainment industry.[4] In 2017, Daniele Di Nunzio, Giuliano Ferrucci and Emanuele Toscano published a study on the living conditions of performing artists and cultural workers in Italy. In this study, they evidenced the vulnerable position occupied by women in terms of pay gap, underrepresentation, and underemployment.[5] Similar issues were raised by the survey conducted between 2017 and 2020 by Amleta (2020), an

Italian collective founded during the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of mapping the presence of women in Italian national theatres and TRIC (Theatres of Significant Cultural Interest).[6]

Echoing the Italian counterpart of Shakespeare's most famous character turned into a feminine entity by replacing the final vowel of his name from "o" to "a", Amleta was created at a time of extreme uncertainty. Following the closure of theatres and the suspension of live events, social media and digital platforms configured themselves as fundamental spaces for communication and information. Far from daily routines and without the perspective of returning to the stage, the artistic community started addressing a variety of issues with the intent of establishing a more ethical system in the context of the performing arts.[7] In Italy, reflections on gender inequalities, discrimination, and harassment in the workplace played a crucial role in the debate led by theatre workers and artists, which came together in newly formed activist groups. As illustrated in an article by Chiara Pizzimenti, before the outbreak of the pandemic, the call for action led by the #metoo and #metootheatre movement in Italy fundamentally resulted in a failure.[8] Despite the increasing interest in the issue of discrimination and abuse faced by women and minorities in the Italian entertainment industry, and the publication of research discussing the extent to which these issues affected the arts and cultural sectors, information activism failed to undermine the masculine domination of theatre stages and audio-visual production. This was partially due to the lack of statistics and data on women's actual presence and conditions in the industry. In addition, when the #metoo movement started spreading in Italy, it did so in a sector that was still scarcely cohesive, as workers' cooperatives and freelancers' associations had only recently started to operate at a national level.

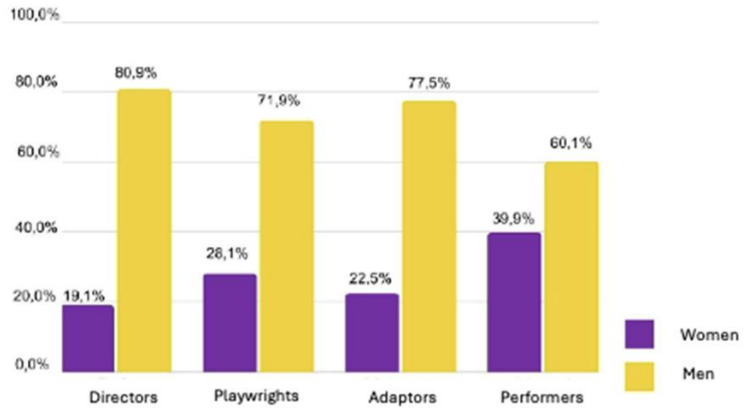
The creation of Amleta contributed significantly to this unification process.[9] As the advent of Covid-19 exacerbated the issues faced by women, making a position already characterised by precariousness and vulnerability more apparent, spreading awareness about malpractice in the workplace turned into a form of communicative and political action. This allowed women to move from an individualised understanding of their subjective experiences towards a level of collective awareness.[10] Since its creation in 2020, one of the major preoccupations of Amleta has been to map the presence of women in the Italian theatre sector. To date, Amleta has conducted two surveys collecting data on a voluntary basis over a time span of three or four years, coinciding with the duration of the public funding plan of the FUS (Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo dal Vivo). The first survey, published in 2020, focused on the period between 2017 and 2020. The most recent survey, published in 2024 within the framework of the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024 in collaboration with the University of Brescia, took into consideration the period between 2020 and 2024. Significantly, both studies have evidenced persistent gender disparities within the sector, confirming the existence of structural barriers and gender discrimination that limit women's access to and career progression in leadership and creative roles within the theatre sector.

According to Amleta's 2024 survey, women make up only 35.1% of the workforce, and their presence varies considerably depending on the role and type of auditorium considered. More specifically, female directors, playwrights and adaptors are underrepresented compared to performers (see fig.1).

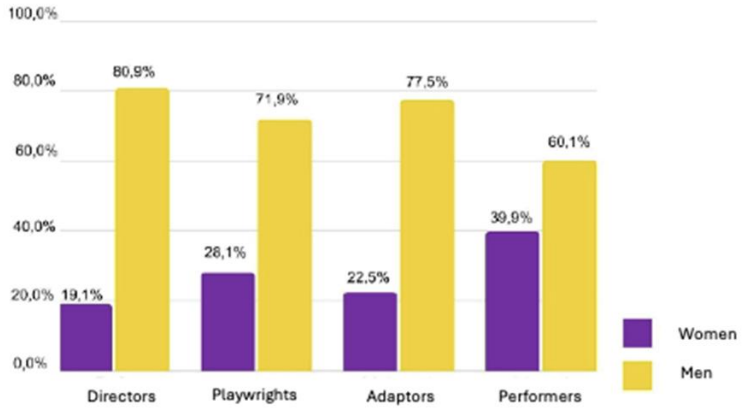


1. Presence of women and men in National Theatres and TRIC, divided by role.
Crédits. Amleta, "Presentazione Mappatura 2020-24", 2024, **URL**.
Accessed 29 March 2024.

In TRIC and secondary halls, that is, in the context of reduced status and visibility, the presence of women is slightly above the national average (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). However, the incidence of female workers in terms of productions and hospitality remains very low, ranging between 20-30%. Female directors, playwrights, and adaptors are underrepresented compared with performers. Crucially, no woman in Italy has ever been entrusted with the direction of a national theatre. Taken together, these data offer a comprehensive perspective on the cultural setting that affected the reception of Latella's *Hamlet*, a show whose cross-gendered casting choices resonated with many audiences and critics as a call for action to promote gender equality in the theatre sector.



2. Presence of women in National Theatres, divided by role.
Crédits. Amleta, "Presentazione Mappatura 2020-24", 2024, **URL**.
Accessed 29 March 2024.



3. Presence of women in TRIC, divided by role.
Crédits. Amleta, "Presentazione Mappatura 2020-24", 2024, **URL**. Accessed 29 March 2024.

2. Latella's *Hamlet:* a play to be listened to rather than watched

As evident from the press articles released after *Hamlet*'s premiere, Latella's decision to cast a woman in the title role was widely interpreted as an act of inclusion and protest for gender equality within the Italian theatrical landscape.[11] By challenging traditional casting norms and offering a platform for a female actor to embody one of Western drama's most iconic characters, Latella signalled a commitment to breaking down barriers and fostering greater diversity on stage. However, according to Latella, the true originality of this casting choice goes beyond mere symbolism. It lay in inviting audiences not only to watch but also to listen attentively to every word in the text. Latella emphasized that, in the context of the 21st century, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* transcended notions of sexuality and gender distinctions. Discussing his unconventional casting choices, Latella asserted that his intent has always been to demonstrate that the power of Shakespeare's text lies in its universality and timeless relevance, as the words themselves possess a profound significance that transcends physical attributes. In essence, Latella's staging was meant to encourage audiences to engage with the play at a deeper level, focusing on the essence of the text rather than on the gender of the actor portraying the main character. This approach underscored the notion that the themes and messages conveyed by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are inherently human experiences that resonate across genders and cultures.

The production's intentions are clear in its staging, which represents a significant departure from conventional performances of *Hamlet*. Latella's production unfolds against the backdrop of Teatro Studio Melato in Milan, one of the most renowned Italian-style theatres in Italy. At the beginning of the show, the actors enter the stage all dressed in white, wearing an oversized two-piece suit that stands out against the bare stage of the production.[12] They settle to the side, sitting on the steps that surround the central stage, occupied only in the last row by spectators, while the others, seated on stools, look out over the orange railings of the four tiers of galleries. Throughout the performance, the lights remain on for most of the show, blurring the line between performer and audience and encouraging active participation from the spectators. This strategic choice undermines the conventional relationship between stage and auditorium,

inviting the audience to fully engage with the performance. Once alone behind the lectern, it's Stefano Patti's turn to break the silence. With Brechtian detachment, Patti's Horatio reads the stage directions that open Shakespeare's text. Taking up the role of mediator, as suggested by the navy tailored suit that sets him apart from the other actors, he performs the task entrusted to him by the dying Hamlet when he says:

> O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story.
> (V.2.290-295)[13]

Echoing Giovanni Testori's role in *I promessi sposi alla prova* (2019), Patti's Horatio acts as a go-between between who officiates the ancient rite of the theatre and who takes part in it. Half career manager half Gen Z politician, it is through his eyes that we witness Hamlet, wearing a too-large white dinner jacket, advancing from the back of the stage and kneeling at the prayer stool where she will remain for the first hour and a half of the play. Antonio Latella's production is thus cast as a ritual in which the audience is called upon to take part as explicitly asked at various times during the long six and a half-hour show. "All rise, enter the King and Queen of Denmark", says Horatio, and members of the audience and actors alike stand up in unison.

As far as audience participation is concerned, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the embodied and critical activity of listening. Spoken, political, poetic: words play a central role in Latella's production. A performance that begins, precisely, with Horatio reading Shakespeare's text and ends pretty much in the same way, with Horatio going over the lines of Act 5 while Hamlet is literally lying on the ground in a dead-like state. "This Hamlet will be a show to be listened to rather than watched", the director commented in an interview,[14] in which he stressed his intention to challenge a culture "forged in the age of print" and thus "fascinated by the spectacle" much more than by "the politics and practices of collective listening.[15] "At my third Hamlet in thirty years", he expanded, "I decided to make a *tabula rasa* and try to hear these words as if they were completely new. This is what I am asking the audience to do: to make a *tabula rasa* within themselves".[16] In the case of his 2021 production of *Hamlet*, Latella's aim resulted in a series of unprecedented choices: the famous "To be or not to be" monologue was pronounced offstage by a Hamlet hidden in the same square pit in which the actors of the dumb show crafted for Claudius and Gertrude in Act 3 had earlier performed, as the prayer stool from the first section of the show turned around empty. Additionally, the famous scene of the duel between Hamlet and Laertes was stripped of its theatricality and brought to life by Horatio's intense and moving interpretation. All actors silently witnessed Fortinbras' arrival solely through Stefano Patti's words, spoken from the lectern.

In full Brechtian fashion, Antonio Latella conceived Hamlet's female casting as an alienation device, so to encourage spectators to maintain a double consciousness of the character and of the actress playing the role. However, dissonances in the reception of the play were made evident by subsequent accounts of spectators and reviewers, bringing forward the possibility that this aim was only partially achieved and that Latella's cross-gender casting choice resonated with the audience differently than intended:

> Classics must be readapted to fit modern taste. However, the role of the biological body, an element that is always a signifier in the theatre, cannot be erased. Thus, if all bodies are "political", in Federica Rosellini's roaring physicality there is also implicitly a protest against patriarchy.[17]

As evidenced by Mario De Santis's review published on *Huffingtonpost*, Latella's attempt to configure Rosellini's body as neutral ground was not entirely successful. Instead of shifting the attention towards more abstract-like qualities of the play, Rosellini's androgynous Hamlet embodied a wealth of contradictory messages rooted in the lived experience of performance.

On a performative level, biological differences acted as a disruptive force, reshaping the map of gender implicit in Shakespeare's text. From the Ghost, "the armoured emblem of patriarchy that Hamlet can never match", to Ophelia, "the virginal sacrifice to father, brother, lover and king", all roles were charged with newfound political implications.[18] Hamlet's antagonism against the rottenness of history and politics made by men, took the shape of a feminist social critique questioning totalitarianism and patriarchy's role in it. From this perspective, Hamlet's clashes with Ophelia and Gertrude acquired new relevance. Cast in the role of two girls broken by the pain caused by the power struggles that killed their fathers, Hamlet and Ophelia suddenly found themselves in very similar positions, holding little power in a world ruled by men. This caused different segments of the show such as the Nunnery and the Closet scenes to be perceived as a comment on choice and female identity in a patriarchal world.

Similarly, the Oedipal elements that traditionally loom over Gertrude and Hamlet's relationship were overshadowed by Rosellini's act of gender redefinition. Frustrated and unable to articulate anything but adoration for the dead and hatred for the living, Latella's Hamlet proved uncapable of nurturing any kind of empathy towards Gertrude and thus remained utterly oblivious to her journey from female sign to female subject, which culminated in her account of Ophelia's death in Act 4 Scene 7.[19] A death that the audience witnessed on stage, as Flaminia Cuzzoli's Ophelia dived in the pool placed centre stage—a set design element reminiscent of Strehler's *Faust* (1989, 1990)—and then re-emerged, floating in her black, translucent clothes while her brother held her lifeless body, meditating revenge (fig. 4 and 5). Little did Latella's choice to entrust another actress, Anna Coppola, with the traditional male roles of the Ghost and Fortinbras to alter the power structures at play in this new configuration. If anything, the doubling of cross-gender casting choices reinforced the fundamental questions raised by the play. Is Hamlet a universal figure whose dilemmas we share indistinctly, male or female? Or rather, should we frame him as a "feminine character" whose words invite a woman's voice?



4. Laertes (Ludovico Fededegni) and Ophelia (Flaminia Cuzzolo)
in *Hamlet* (2021), dir. Antonio Latella.
Crédits. Masiar Pasquali, 2021. Piccolo Teatro, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.



5. Franco Graziosi in *Faust* (1989), dir. Giorgio Strehler.
Crédits. Piccolo Teatro, "Faust, frammenti", **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

Compared to the most recent productions featuring a female Hamlet that have proven successful in the anglophone world, Latella's *Hamlet* did not propose a complicated montage of feminine and masculine impulses but rather a spiritual and physical fusion of female and male, a sort of 'pre-gendered version' of the character that was convincingly supported by Hamlet's ambivalent and shifting attitude to gender as manifested in Shakespeare's text. Indeed, more thoroughly than in other tragedies, in *Hamlet* the main focus is on the character's "sweet", "gentle" and "piteous" attitude, a feature traditionally associated with female sensibility in

Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. In Shakespeare's text, Hamlet denounces women as performers—"ambling", "lisping", disguised as "Niobe, all tears"—yet he describes himself as woman-like in his grief and his failure to achieve revenge. When it comes to eloquence, he resents:

> That I, the son of a dear murdered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab. (II.2.501-505)

He then speaks of himself as a battleground contested by female forces (III.2.56-61) and dismisses his intuition before the duel with Laertes as "such a kind of gain-giving / as perhaps would trouble a woman" (V.2.187-188). The insistence on Hamlet's feminine nature is reiterated by other characters throughout the play. So, for example, Gertrude clings to a positive faith in her son, affirming that he is "as patient as the female dove" (V.1.265), while Claudius condemns Hamlet's "unmanly grief" (I.2.94), a feature that is duplicated in Laertes, who is ashamed of his tears for Ophelia, whose death makes him fear that the woman in him "will be out" (IV.4.187).

This oscillation between male and female was utterly reinforced in the production by the new translation that Latella commissioned to Federico Bellini. Among the three main versions of *Hamlet*, the first Quarto of 1603, the second Quarto of 1604 and the Folio version of 1623, Bellini kept in mind the so-called 'good Quarto', to which he proceeded to make some additions. This included the integration of the passage in Act 3 Scene 2 of the Folio, where Hamlet instructs the First player about the role of the clown. The choice probably stood out to audience members familiar with Shakespeare's play, since the addition appears neither in the rather courtly Italian translation by Eugenio Montale (1943), nor in the versions by Raffaello Piccoli (1946) and Luigi Squarzina (1952), which were conceived specifically for the stage, nor in the most recent translations by Agostino Lombardo (1995) and Rocco Coronato (2022). In the preface to the published version of his translation, Bellini justified his choice affirming that:

> There are some additions or modifications that I consider significant, taken in particular from the *In-folio* of 1623 and the first *In-quarto*, or Q1, of 1603 [...]. The interpretative basis of this version of Hamlet is in fact mainly concerned with the relationship between truth and lies or, if you prefer, between reality and its representation.[20]

To further emphasize the artificial and metatheatrical nature of the play, Bellini's translation retains other aspects of the source text. The title, for one, was kept in English, as did all honorific titles as well as the iconic "farewell" that kept being reiterated throughout the play, remarking the artificial tone of the narration. Crucially, Hamlet was free to retain its English name. A privilege that was not granted to any other character in the play and that held a liberating potential on stage since the Italian language does not have a female version of the name by which to acknowledge a female version of the character. Yet, "there's the rub". In translating Shakespeare's text into Italian, Federico Bellini and by extension Antonio Latella were confronted with a linguistic impossibility. As Italian grammar does not provide neutral forms, they were forced to choose between female pronouns and desinences and their male counterparts. Thus, the universalization and de-gendering of Hamlet's character auspicated by Latella, was met with the intrinsically oppressive binary cage of the Italian language. Finally, Bellini and Latella vouched for the male option, hoping to achieve a de-familiarizing effect. For

the audience, however, this choice casted once more Hamlet's body as the battlefield of the story of how masculinity appropriates, objectifies, and disempowers women.

3. Challenging tradition: Italian Women Defying Gender Norms in *Hamlet*

In constructing the figure of an actress/prince whose very presence exposes artifice, Latella was inevitably forced to deal with the visual and theatrical references to the character that were most vivid in the imagination of the audience. As we will see, these included a very limited number of women. Italian theatre is not new to cross-gender casting. It is well known that up to the Italian Renaissance, when the work of actresses on the Italian stage started being documented, male non-professional actors played women's parts with the exception of women dancers and singers who participated in *Intermezzi*, the spectacles that occurred between acts.[21] The absence of women on the Italian stage is a practice that may have been influenced by the theatrical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, where acting was considered an exclusively male occupation, predominantly performed by slaves. Although there is a small number of surviving documents providing insight into the early stages of *commedia erudita*, many sources such as letters, diaries, and chronicles attest that the practice of cross-gender casting for women's roles was widely accepted by the Renaissance audience as a convention.[22] However, if the practice of casting male actors in women's roles was already normalized by the end of the 16th century, the same could not be said for women playing male roles. The first Italian actress listed in a surviving company notarial document was one Lucrezia Senese, cited in a Roman contract of 1564. However, it is safe to infer from other documented examples, that *commedia dell'arte* troupes introduced female performers as early as the 1540s.[23] It is worth noting that, even after actresses were introduced, not all female roles were played by women. However, once the taboo was broken, female performers quickly became established in the roles of heroines or *Innamorate*.

Needless to say, this did not grant permission to take up one of the greatest roles in Western drama. The first attested account of an Italian woman playing Hamlet dates back to 1878, and was attributed to Giacinta Pezzana, an actress most famous for mentoring Eleonora Duse. The story of how Pezzana came to play this role is closely intertwined with the history of Italian independence and national unity, as well as with the creation of the first national theatre in Italy's newly established capital, Rome. At the turn of the century, the rise of middle-class values persuaded Pezzana to lend herself to a calculated experiment. Her Hamlet *en travesti* was ridiculed by conservative critics, but supported by the emancipationist press, which shared her desire to challenge "masculine brains" and her conviction that "in the field of art, intelligence has no sex".[24] This statement comes really close to Latella's comment about his own production of *Hamlet*. Interestingly, this is not the only parallel between Rosellini and Pezzana's performances. Writing about her acting style, Giulia Tellini described Pezzana's performance as "alienating, almost Brechtian", so much that it imposed "a critical distance between actor and character".[25] A comment that may sound familiar compared to Latella's *Hamlet.* Also, the costumes for the 1878 production were designed to replicate Elizabethan fashion. Something we partially witness in Latella's production, when in the second section of the show all actors remove the uniforms, they have been wearing and dress in mourning with large skirts, feminine dresses and cassocks in full Elizabethan fashion.

Coming back to the issue of actresses playing Hamlet, Pezzana's experiment remained a *unicum* in Italian history for a very long time. The second actress to claim the role was Manuela Kustermann, who starred in Giancarlo Nanni's production of *Hamlet* in 1978, that is seventy-nine years after French actress Sarah Bernhardt's legendary performance. Kustermann came to the role after having interpreted Ophelia in the 1963 *Hamlet* production by Carmelo Bene, which, together with the performances by Vittorio Gassman (1952) and Giorgio Albertazzi (1963), remains one of the most iconic in the Italian tradition. Although there are few extant testimonies documenting Kustermann's take on this role, the reviews paint a contradictory portrait of her performance. On the one hand, reviewers appreciated Kustermann's masculine treatment of the character.[26] On the other, critics complained that Kustermann's androgynous portrait of the character lacked muscular interpretation, affirming that Kustermann's vocal features made her Hamlet look closer to a child rather than a man.[27] Neither a man, nor a woman, simply a person. Giancarlo Nanni's attempt to raise the character above sexuality is something that can be easily related to Latella's production, since the director's intent was not to exploit cross-gender casting to take a radical position in relation to dominant patriarchal stereotypes of gender and sexuality but rather to play with reality and its representation to turn Shakespeare's text "into something rich and strange" (I.2.400).[28]

The exploration of the divide between fiction and reality into theatre has been one of the major preoccupations of most recent Italian productions of *Hamlet*. Interestingly, two of these featured the same actress, Elisabetta Pozzi, playing the title role. The first is a sophisticated version staged in period costumes and directed by Walter Le Moli in 2002. The other is a reworking of the text based on notes written by Pozzi and other actors who had played the role since the beginning of the 20th century, entitled *Notes for Hamlet* (2018). Another three productions of *Hamlet* were penned by Antonio Latella. The first is a contemporary adaptation that featured the heavy influence of *Nekrošius* staged in 2001. The second is a reworking of the text in the form of a museum exhibit entitled *Not to be — Hamlet's portraits* (2008). In this version, Latella divided the text into six thematic rooms and eleven scenes to be experienced separately or all together for a total of 15 hours.[29] Latella's third encounter with *Hamlet* resulted in the production discussed in this study: the first one to feature an integral version of the play and also to pay tribute to the history of Italian theatre by making apparent the ghosts that haunted the stage hosting the production. Indeed, Act 3 of Latella's 2021 *Hamlet* opened with a long line of costumes being brought to the stage (see fig. 6). These included the costumes used by Strehler for his *Harlequin* (1947) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1976), and the costumes of Ronconi's *Lehman Trilogy* (2014-15).



6. Federica Rosellini in *Hamlet* (2021), dir. Antonio Latella. In the background, it is possible to see the long lines of costumes from the Piccolo Teatro Collection. **Crédits**. Masiar Pasquali, 2021. Piccolo Teatro, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

It is to those empty shells that Latella's Hamlet dedicated his famous directions to the actors, emphasizing that theatre's utmost function is to hold "the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III.2.20-22). "The only true ghost that exists is that of the theatre, the memory of the stage protects and preserves history", Latella reportedly affirmed.[30] It is perhaps for this reason that, in the second part of the production, all the actors appeared dressed in black, in the Elizabethan fashion, and gave free rein to all the possibilities of their art: Federica Rosellini's *Hamlet* inaugurated the section by singing "Lamette" (1982), a hit song by Italian pop-rock singer Donatella Rettore whose lyrics sounded as an ironic anticipation of the events to come:

> Give me a razor blade I'll slit my wrists
> This moth night becomes wicked
> It promises well it promises so well
> […] I'm already talking to myself
> And I draw in the air
> Of course I've sinned a little but what a pleasure
> […] Feel how this blade slices
> From right to centre zac!
> From top to bottom zip![31]

Similarly, Flaminia Cuzzoli's Ophelia sang "Vinegar & Salt" (2000) by Hooverphonic, accompanied by Laertes on the piano: "I like the things that you hate / And you hate the things that I like / But it hurts / Honesty's your church / But sometimes / It's better to lie".[32] Throughout the second section, all actors danced, ran and played, only to fly away like soap bubbles towards the painful epilogue of the story, when reality became too difficult to represent. At that precise moment, storytelling took the place of acting, Strehler's and Ronconi's costumes packed away and forgotten. Set against the backdrop of the dark piece of land representing the cemetery, the actors stood in their pews, an image that seemed to be taken straight from Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* (1976), while the narrator/director Horatio gave voice to the lines of Claudius (Francesco Manetti), Gertrude (Francesca Cutolo), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Andrea Sorrentino), unaware victims of the spiral of death and despair in which the court was about to fall. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes and the ensuing tragic epilogue took the shape of a compelling narrative, urging to be passed down through generations. This cry for theatre emphasized the importance of embodied orality on stage, highlighting theatre's responsibility to preserve and hand down the tales that have shaped humanity.

To conclude, Latella's *Hamlet* was an intense and bruising piece of high stakes drama. Predicated on the in-between, attention to processes of representation abounded in Latella's staging, as characters blurred the line between reality and fiction. Immersing the audience into a place of suspension, Hamlet's story was told in the hope that it could invalidate itself, implode in the telling and cease to represent the people whose stories it conveyed to embrace its universality. Paraphrasing the comment by Italian actor Giorgio Albertazzi on the *Hamlet* he played in 1963,

> we play *Hamlet* because reality weights us down and humiliates us, and imagination raises us up. We play *Hamlet* because we cannot decipher the mystery of life and death, because *Hamlet* is the cry of protest of the last men in the Western world before the end, before "silence".[33]

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Notes

[1] See especially Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[2] Sara Chiappori, "Antonio Latella firma il suo terzo Amleto: 'Nei classici le parole non hanno sesso'", *La Repubblica,* 5 June 2021, n. p. **URL**. Accessed 17 May 2023.

[3]While denouncing precarious working conditions, activists joining these occupations also experimented with the autonomous management of cultural spaces and working relations. See Marianna d'Ovidio and Alberto Cossu, "Culture is Reclaiming the Creative City: The Case of Macao in Milan, Italy", *City, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, n°7, 2017, p. 12; Alice Borchi, "Teatro Valle Occupato: Protesting, Occupying and Making Art in Contemporary Italy", *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, vol. 22, n°1, 2017, p. 126-129; Antimo Luigi Farro and Simone Maddanu, " Occupying the City: From Social Housing to the Theatre", in Enzo Colombo and Paola Rebughini (eds.), *Youth and the Politics of the Present*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 141-152.

[4] Emanuela Naclerio and Giulia Giorgi, "Spotlight on Discrimination at Work: Italian Actresses' Construction of Digital Spaces of Feminist Struggle", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 00.0, 2023, p. 1-17.

[5] See Daniele Di Nunzio, Giuliano Ferrucci and Emanuele Toscano, *Vita da artisti, ricerca nazionale sulle condizioni di vita e di lavoro dei professionisti dello spettacolo*, Rome, Fondazione di Vittorio, 2017.

[6] Amleta, "Mappatura 2017/2020", 2020. **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

[7] See Hjalmar Bang Carlsen, Jonas Toubøl and Benedikte Brinker, "On Solidarity and Volunteering during the Covid-19 Crisis in Denmark: The Impact of Social Networks and Social Media Groups on the Distribution of Support", *European Societies*, vol. 23, n°1, 2021, p. 122-140; Allegra Clare Schermuly, Alan Petersen and Alison Anderson "'I'm not an Activist!': Digital Self-advocacy in Online Patient Communities", *Critical Public Health*, vol. 31, n°2, 2021, p. 204-213. Emanuela Naclerio, "Traces of solidarity: Performing artists' Efforts Against Individualisation and Isolation during Covid-19 Pandemic", *Sciences et actions sociales*, n°18, 2022.

[8] Chiara Pizzimenti, "Il #MeToo? Zanardo: 'In Italia non è mai stato pop'", *Vanity Fair*, 16 December 2019, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

[9] Emanuela Naclerio and Giulia Giorgi's most recent study on the subject has shown how Amleta has managed to consolidate a safe digital space to develop an Italian community of actresses providing support and cohesion against discrimination and violence (2023). See *ibid.*

[10] Clementina Casula, Sonia Bertolini, Pierre Bataille, et al., "From Atypical to Paradigmatic? Artistic Work in Contemporary Capitalist Societies", *Sociologia del Lavoro*, n°157, 2020, p. 1-27.

[11] The reference is to Anna Bandettini, "Amleto è donna, la provocazione di Antonio Latella: 'Per ritrovare il senso dell'altro che l'uomo non ha'", *Repubblica,* 23 May 2021, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024; Maurizio Porro, "Antonio Latella: 'Il mio Amleto è una donna che mette al centro i dubbi'", 21 May 2021, *Il Corriere,* **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024; Egle Santolini, "L'Amleto di Latella? È una donna", *La Stampa,* 3 June 2021, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

[12] For images from Antonio Latella's production of *Hamlet* visit the website of Piccolo Teatro, **URL**. Accessed 17 July 2024.

[13] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* in Greenblatt, S., Cohen, W., Howard, E., et al. (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.

[14] Anna Bandettini, *op. cit.*

[15] Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age,* Cambridge, Polity, 2013, p. viii.

[16] Egle Santolini, *op. cit.*

[17] Mario De Santis, "L'Hamlet di Antonio Latella, più lotta che dubbio", *Huffingtonpost*, 13 October 2022, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

[18] Tony Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 17-18.

[19] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, London & New York, Methuen, 1988, p. 117.

[20] Federico Bellini, "Introduzione", in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, trans. Federico Bellini, Milano, Scalpendi, 2022, p. 6.

[21] Laura Giannetti Ruggiero, "When Male Characters Pass as Women: Theatrical Play and Social Practice in the Italian Renaissance", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 36, n°3, 2005, p. 744.

[22] Alessandro D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano*, vol. 2, Turin, Loescher, 1891.

[23] Letizia Panizza, *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society,* London, Routledge, 2000, p. 183.

[24] Laura Mariani, *Il tempo delle attrici. Emancipazionismo e teatro in Italia fra Otto e Novecento*, Bologna, Editoriale Mongolfiera, 1991, p. 78.

[25]Giulia Tellini, "Medea da Adelaide Ristori a Giacinta Pezzana", *Drammaturgia,* 13 October 2005, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

[26] Paolo Emilio Poesio, "Amleto davanti allo specchio", *La Nazione*, 29 July 1978.

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[29] Enrico Fiore, "Latella trasforma Amleto in un museo", *Il Mattino*, 30 giugno 2008b.

[30] Maurizio Porro, *op. cit.*

[31] Donatella Rettore, "Lamette", *Kamikaze Rock 'n' Roll Suicide*, Ariston, 1982.

[32] Hooverphonic, "Vinegar & Salt ", *The Magnificent Tree*, Columbia, 2000.

[33] Enrico Fiore, "Progetto Non essere—Hamlet's portrait—regia Antonio Latella", *Sipario*, 6 July 2008a, **URL**. Accessed 28 March 2024.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

“Art made tongue-tied by authority”: Re-Gendering Prospero and Lear in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre

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ABSTRACT

On the Shakespearean stage, the actress has always been marked by absence or exclusion. She has had to face rigid social expectations which defined her as subordinate to the authority of the playwright and his fellow (male) actors. Shakespearean performances with an all-male cast have been more accepted than all-female productions, especially in those cases, where it seems to be crucial that the main character is a man/husband/father as well. In my paper, I analyse current Hungarian theatre productions in which the tragic protagonist characterised by hegemonic masculinity and agency is played by an actress. My aim is to explore to what extent female casting challenges mimetic performance and whether it can provoke the perception of the viewer, the authority of the playwright, and the (Hungarian) acting and dramatic tradition generally related to Shakespeare. I also discuss how the representation of political power is transformed in cross-gender performances. With reference to some international examples of tragic characters played by women (e.g., Fiona Shaw, 1995; Vanessa Redgrave, 2000; Harriet Walter, 2016), my paper will focus on *The Tempest* by Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company (2018) and *King Lear* by Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, Hungary (2019).

KEYWORDS

cross-gender, cross-casting, female casting, Hungarian theatre, *The Tempest*, *King Lear*

RÉSUMÉ

Sur la scène shakespearienne, l'actrice se définit toujours par absence ou exclusion. Elle doit faire face à des attentes sociales rigides qui la définissaient comme subordonnée à l'autorité du dramaturge et de ses camarades acteurs. Les représentations shakespeariennes qui ont une distribution entièrement masculine ont toujours été mieux acceptées que les spectacles à la distribution entièrement féminine, particulièrement dans les cas où il semble crucial que le personnage principal soit également un homme/un mari/un père. Dans mon article, j'analyse les représentations du théâtre hongrois contemporain dans lesquelles le protagoniste tragique, caractérisé par une masculinité hégémonique et une forte autorité, est interprété par une actrice. Mon but est d'explorer dans quelle mesure une distribution féminine met en question une interprétation mimétique, et de savoir si elle peut provoquer la perception du spectateur, l'autorité du dramaturge et la tradition théâtrale et dramatique (hongroise) généralement reliée à Shakespeare. Je soulève aussi la question de savoir comment la représentation du pouvoir politique est transformée dans des spectacles à la distribution inversée. En se référant à des exemples internationaux de personnages tragiques interprétés par des actrices (Fiona Shaw en 1995, Vanessa Redgrave en 2000, Harriet Walter en 2016, par exemple), mon article portera sur *The Tempest* par la compagnie hongroise Subotica Theatre (2018) et *King Lear* par le Csokonai Theatre de Debrecen (2019).

MOTS-CLÉS

distribution inversée, distribution féminine, théâtre hongrois, *La Tempête*, *Le roi Lear*

In English theatre, cross-gender performances have a long tradition which has a historical reason. The fact that in early modern theatre female roles were played by young boys has an impact on how we look at gender and casting in contemporary Shakespearean theatre, When discussing the historical context of cross-dressing in early modern England Jean E. Howard underlines that wearing the clothes of the other sex disturbed the stability of social order and gender struggles were displayed on clothes.[1] However, cross-dressing was not interpreted on equal terms: wearing female garment for a man was seen as shameful, while a woman dressed as a man signified uncontrolled sexuality and a threat to society.[2] Since the discursive construction of the two sexes in early modern England were different, women who wore men's apparel produced social anxiety.[3]

This historical concern can partly explain that all-male performances and men in the role of women in Shakespeare's plays on the English stages are more accepted than women playing the role of men. Due to early modern theatrical traditions and the connected "original practices", actors playing female roles as well as all-male productions are historically justified, they are the part of cultural memory and theatre history. After remarkable attempts of actresses such as Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman or Sarah Bernhardt, significant female Shakespearean performances in the 20th century started to emerge (and stir up critical response) only after Deborah Warner's *Richard II* with Fiona Shaw in 1995. Warner's staging at the National Theatre caused harsh critical controversy probably because casting a woman in a major Shakespearean role is more provocative on a national stage than in an experimental production. Shaw's acting also created anxiety because the gender of her character was undefinable: critics alternatively labelled it "a homosexual male", "dyke", "an adolescent boy" or "a man-child".[4]

Since the 1980s, the reason for actresses playing male roles in Shakespearean plays is underscored by various circumstances. One of them is the lack of job opportunities for women in theatre not only in the leading roles, but also in artistic or stage directors' positions.[5] Another aspect is the changing perspective on gender roles, identity, and the Shakespearean canon. In other words, the favourable reception of female casting and cross-gender performances in different theatrical cultures depends on cultural-historical legacy, dramatical traditions and practices as well as the position of Shakespeare in the literary canon.

The most famous examples of cross-gender performances on the English stage were collected and analysed by Elizabeth Klett. In her book *Wearing the Codpiece: Cross-Gender and English National Identity* (2009), she discusses performances between 1995 and 2009, and convincingly argues that female casting is treated with doubt since it is assumed to threaten Shakespeare's authority and English national identity.[6] At the same time, the remarkable endeavours Klett writes about do not necessarily concur with a radically different dramaturgy or acting style. Most performances remain within the realm of classical acting: based on a thorough knowledge of Shakespearean poetry and the examination of the characters' psyche/motivations, acknowledged actors play major Shakespearean roles. Female performances seem to respect the classical dramatic tradition and do not dare to challenge Shakespearean acting perhaps this way they claim to be legitimate successors of great (male) actors. Also, apart from some invigorating exceptions, in their concept, these performances remain traditional and protest against being labelled feminist theatre or involved in political or gender issues. However, it is beyond doubt that re-gendering or cross-gendering in theatre is a political act in itself especially if it concerns national drama.

I agree with Sarah Werner who—when writing about feminist approaches to Shakespearean acting—makes a very important observation: voice work, which is the key of classical actors' training "sets up a falsely universal notion of character that relies on a male norm of interpretation, ignoring the problems that character reading has for Shakespeare's female roles".[7] Voice work is thus quite ambivalent from a gendered perspective because, on the one hand, it is seen as a female territory given how its theorist and teachers were mostly women, but on the other hand, it is subordinated to (male) directors and the author as its serves the text, the very source of understanding and accessing the character's psyche to be played by an actor.[8] This might explain why Shakespearean actresses are willing to play as if they were their own male counterparts and why such performances insist on being neutral, ideology-free and concentrating purely on so called neutral universality and eternal human values.

In my paper, I am interested in what female casting can challenge or offer in cases when male rulers (not just any roles) are played by actresses, and whether they include any feminist perspective or intention. I will analyse contemporary Hungarian Shakespeare productions in which the tragic protagonist is played by an actress. The reason why I chose Prospero from *The Tempest* (Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company, 2018) and *Lear* (Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, 2019) is not only that on Hungarian stages, there are rare examples of cross-gender casting in the main roles, but also because of my interest in the possible transformation of political power in a play where male authority is given to a female actor. Moreover, I want to examine whether cross-gender performance challenges mimetic acting, the perception of the viewer and the authority of the playwright and if it affects the Hungarian acting/dramatic tradition generally connected to Shakespeare.

But before I expound the Hungarian context in contemporary Shakespearean performances, as a way of comparison I would like to indicate what actresses in the English-speaking world think of playing leading male roles and Shakespearean theatre. Harriet Walter (acknowledged actress working with the Royal Shakespeare Company from the 1980s) in her article in *The Guardian* writes about the opportunities of middle-aged actresses and the proportion of male and female roles in Shakespearean plays. As she puts it, her Shakespearean acting life has been mercifully extended by the 2016 Donmar Warehouse staging of two Shakespeare plays with an all-female cast directed by Phyllida Lloyd. "Shakespeare's words empower the speaker, and it is a wonderful novelty for us to feel that power (and responsibility) and to hear our own and other female voices speaking mighty verses about freedom, leadership, destiny etc.".[9] She also adds that the all-female Donmar adaptations she plays in gives voice to the voiceless in many different ways, and with an all-women cast, one can "look beyond gender to our own humanity", because "Shakespeare expressed this humanity better than anyone".[10]

Another example is Lisa Wolpe, the leader of Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company, who—in an interview with Terri Power—draws a trajectory from a love of Shakespearean poetry to playing male roles as a part of her work in order to reach empowerment of women and diversity on the stage. At the same time, she contradictory claims that the gender question is only a part of the job, it is not in the focus of her work.[11] Beyond the mission of creating performances outside the heteronormative spectrum, it is interesting to note that she plays major male characters dressed as a man while her interpretation of these characters is rather conventional and text-based.

A further remarkable experiment was Adjoah Andoh's *Richard II* (co-directed with Lynette Linton) in Shakespeare's Globe, Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2019. Andoh has explained her approach to the play and the role in several interviews, and what I find interesting is the way she

resolutely refuses a possible feminist interpretation and the gender aspect of the performance: "So, no playing gender. We just needed to think about who this human being is […] I didn't want us to think about male or female, because who goes around thinking about that? […] I wanted us simply to play the person".[12] If we look at the play, however, it cannot be denied that being the first company of women of colour on a major UK stage has political/ideological significance as well. So, the question is why these artists when explaining their work intend to keep a careful distance from the idea which is the core to their mission?

In the examples I am going to discuss below, there is also hardly any admitted or direct sign of feminist theatre or political purpose, however, the cultural atmosphere in which Hungarian theatre is presently set is deeply politicised. Consequently, in my approach, I need to refer both to the status of Hungarian theatres and the dramatical-historical tradition which affects how cross-gender performance or cross-casting is considered or seen. In Hungarian theatre history, breeches roles existed mainly in the 19th-century entertaining genres such as the opera or the operetta. Lujza Blaha (1850-1926) or Sári Fedák (1879-1955) celebrated actresses of the era regularly playing male characters which—since they wore skin-tight pants and costumes bringing out their curvy figure—was a real pleasure for the male gaze. At the beginning of the 20th century, breeches roles started to disappear.

Contemporary Hungarian repertoire theatres (especially out of Budapest) work rather conventionally, they produce classical plays with standard characterising and dramaturgical interpretation. Classics are played with modesty, predominantly following the track of psychological realism. The artistic concept is created by the director, consequently collective creation is rare and unique, the actors' ideas remain inferior. As for cross-casting and gender issues, especially since the so called "anti-LGBT law"[13] was approved by the Parliament in 2021, theatres are extremely cautious with their artistic decisions. This results in outdated repertoires, in lack of contemporary plays and in elimination of progressive tendencies in state theatres.[14]

Alternative companies and ensembles—which, in Hungary means theatres not funded by the government but eligible for grants or supported by civic patronage—are more experimental in every sense, however, they continuously have infrastructural and financial difficulties meaning lesser numbers and variety of performances.[15] So, on the whole, cross-casting is not a novelty in 21st-century Hungarian theatre, but it is a sensitive topic, so much so that one can hardly ever see gender-swapping or cross-casting especially in a classical plays.[16] Shakespeare is definitely a classical and canonized author, his plays have been much respected and frequently played from the 19th century on, and major Shakespearean roles like Hamlet, Lear or Othello were the peaks of some renowned actors' careers such as Tamás Major (1910-1986) or Miklós Gábor (1919-1998).

This is why it is interesting that recent Hungarian stage productions experiment with casting actresses in leading roles. The main themes in both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are political power, authority, and aging. Lear and Prospero are rulers whose personal actions and public deeds are motivated by the loss of their high status. My main questions are whether Hungarian cross-gender performances can challenge mimetic theatre or alter the reception of the viewer, and whether it changes how political power is represented on stage. I was also interested to what extent such performances can be subversive or progressive in theatrical and political terms.

The Tempest directed by György Hernyák starred Natália Vicei, the leading actress of the Hungarian Company of Subotica Theatre. The location might be significant in this case, because

although the ensemble belongs to Subotica Theatre in Serbia, they form an autonomous (Hungarian) artistic community. Nevertheless, not only are they more independent from the institutionalised theatre system of Hungary, but they are also on the margin of the attention of the Hungarian cultural politics which implies that they do not need to fulfil alleged or concrete political expectations.

The script of Hernyák's *The Tempest* was based on Ádám Nádasdy's modern translation, and the performance itself was rather short, 1 hour 40 minutes in time. In terms of genre, it was defined as a "comic-tragedy with music" as the director put significant accent on the comic scenes and effects, the songs, and the background music. Direct humour was involved: for instance, in the first scene, Ariel appears in spotlight while doing a pantomime and some tap dance, and soon after provides a professional weather forecast signalling the forthcoming storm. The text contains several additional passages from other Shakespearean texts: Caliban, for instance, recites *Richard III*'s opening monologue in the last act to Prospero, and Ariel says goodbye to the audience with *Sonnet 66*. These passages make the atmosphere dark and morose, while jokes and improvisational episodes strengthen the entertaining effect. These features and directorial decisions, however, do not explain why the role of Prospero is given to Natália Vicei.

The production uses grotesque and unexpected elements in its dramaturgy and concept. Since it is a short staging, events follow in rapid succession. Ariel, by announcing which act is coming seems to urge the events. Beside the references to other Shakespearean plays, Hungarian folk music, additional lines, and passages from Hungarian poetry are added to the playscript. Ariel (Ervin Pálfi) is not an airy spirit here, but a cynical master of ceremony wearing a bowler hat. He frequently announces which act is coming and communicates with the audience directly. He makes ironic comments regarding the actions, and he is on stage almost during the whole play. Although he is invisible for the other characters, his presence for the audience is very dominant emphasised by his songs, jokes, jigs and dances. In a sense, it seems that instead of Prospero, he is the central character in the play.

Saša Senković, the creator of the scenery placed a large tree laid horizontally in the centre which had several functions, but in most scenes, it symbolises the desolation and the loneliness of the main character, Prospero. Besides, the whole (bare) stage represents a desert land which can be associated with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and in the play, the gestures of waiting and disappointment also become crucial elements. The stage is always in semi-darkness occasionally lit up and disturbed by sharp flashes and sparkles. The scenery represents Prospero's seclusive behaviour as well as her physical distance from the other characters. It is mostly Ariel who interferes with the others. The protagonist here is shown as a rather introvert figure which might have to do with the fact that she is a woman and a mother.

As Eckart Voigts points out, *The Tempest* is conventionally a masculine play with Prospero representing a father, a magician, an author and a colonizer.[17] This is strengthened by some very famous interpretations by Giorgio Strehler (1948), Peter Greenaway (1991) and Stefan Pucher (2007). The best-known female "Prospera" was performed by Helen Mirren in Julie Taymor's 2011 film, which was probably the culmination of earlier attempts such as, for example, Vanessa Redgrave in the New Globe (2000).[18]

Directed by Lenka Udovicki, the Globe production with Redgrave was intended to be authentic and historical. Redgrave did not play a female Prospero, but her stage presence was androgynous and complex. She simultaneously represented authority, generosity, sentiment, and power. She "did not make any effort to walk like a man. Nor did she attempt to sound

authentically masculine; she lowered her voice a bit to achieve a deeper sound".[19] The significance of the performance was that it was set in the Globe, which definitely stressed the play's strong connection to the English theatrical tradition as well as to Shakespeare's canonized position as a national playwright. Helen Mirren in the film, however, played a mother and a duchess, thus, altering the dynamics of the parent-child relationship in the plot further. She left the Milanese throne after her husband died, being accused of witchcraft. With this altered backstory, Taymor offered "a feminist critique of patriarchal power."[20]

The Subotica Theatre production, to some extent recalls Taymor's film, because although the original name Prospero is kept, Vice plays a woman and appears as a mother. Other characters refer to her as a "rough woman" or a "silly cow", which is rather humiliating, but it quite suits the depiction of the character. Her appearance does not suggest power or authority, she is small, weak and short-haired. She wears ragged clothes, a hooded jacket and fingerless gloves with the impression that she is a solitary vagabond, not a ruler. After the tempest in Act 1, she mops the floor carefully. At the same time, she refers to herself as "the Duke of Milan", but she is not sublime or imposing at all.

The whole play is centred around Prospero's personal connections and pain over the loss of her family relationships. The grief and the anger she feels and expresses is not for losing the land, but an expression of being deeply disappointed with her brother who betrayed her. Miranda (played by Andrea Verebes) is a childish and naïve young teenager who shares several private moments with her mother. Prospero—since she is the only one her daughter can rely on—is a caring parent who imprisons Caliban mainly because he had tried to rape Miranda, not because Prospero wants to enslave him. She protectively wants to keep the painful events of the past a secret for her daughter, and when family history is eventually revealed, the audience can see a mother cherishing her child who had to grow up without a real family.

Another act of protection is that as soon as she discovers Miranda falling in love with Ferdinand, she feels betrayed as a mother, not as a ruler, and becomes furious because she does doubt Ferdinand being an ideal candidate for her daughter. The presentation of the relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand fits this idea, because although Miranda is honestly surprised by the appearance of men on the island, her interest is not spiritual or compassionate at all. When she first meets Ferdinand—who is obviously a womaniser here—he woos her in Italian, and they immediately have overheated feelings towards each other. Later in a comic and prankish episode—in which Miranda suddenly becomes very self-assured and conscious about what she wants—, they finally seduce each other with Ariel's invisible assistance providing romantic music and gently directing their movements. After briefly commenting on the scene ("sexual education is done") and confining them in a shelter, Ariel, while loudly imitating the sounds of their lovemaking, leaves them alone.

It seems that Miranda's rebellion against her mother as well as their only conflict in the play is mainly motivated by her attraction towards the young prince.[21] When Prospero realises that Miranda and Ferdinand were involved in an intimate relationship, she gets furious, and they have a very heated argument. She blames Ariel and herself for her previous deeds which led here, but it is obvious that she is desperate as a mother, not as a duke. She breaks her wooden staff right after this episode, which is neither a pathetic moment nor a political act, then she collapses as her daughter comforts her. At the end of the scene, she offers Miranda to Ferdinand for marriage although still worried about the prospect and tries to escape the situation very clumsily. This is not a pathetic moment either, but a comical one.

In his play, Prospero's relationship with Ariel is also quite personal. Ariel is not only a servant, but apparently, he is the only person (moreover, a man) whom Prospero, as a lonely woman can rely on. Although she single-handedly tries to control her whole environment, she is not able to do so, and needs (male) support. At the same time, she attempts to rule over him many times: for instance, she does not let him smoke, but then in the final scene, they have a cigarette together. In their last scene, when the master liberates her servant, they hug each other, and because of the sudden intimacy of the moment, the situation becomes embarrassing for both of them.



1. Ervin Pálfi (Ariel) and Natália Vicei (Prospero) in *The Tempest* (2018).
Crédits. With the permission of Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company.
Photograph by Attila Kovács.

Ariel disappears very quickly, but he returns in the last scene when Prospero, after forgiving her enemies, almost commits suicide with a rope she prepared for his enemies. They have a conversation about the destructive power of ruling and say goodbye. Thus, the finale is not ceremonial or solemn, but bitter and depressing. As an eventually abandoned mother, Prospero almost destroys herself, but since Ariel is still there, she changes her mind.

As reviews of Hernyák's *The Tempest* also note, the choice of Prospero being played by an actress is more of an interesting detail than a directorial intention with a direct message. Vicei definitely plays a vengeful woman who shows more anger than wisdom.[22] She does not have a magic wand and rarely refers to her previous studies, her only treasure is her daughter. She does not analyse the events or shares her knowledge, instead she concentrates on her personal loss and revenge. Vicei's acting is classical, but moderate and sensitive, she hardly ever raises her voice. The concept does not explain why an actress was chosen to play Prospero, and there is no sign

of any political message either. Being the leading actress of the company, Vicei's stage presence is charismatic, but it is overshadowed by Ariel's much more dominant stage presence. So, there is a woman Prospero who loses her reign and finally her daughter as well, then returns to her land, but, in fact, no one really cares or pays attention to it all.



2. Natália Vicei (Prospero) in *The Tempest* (2018).
Crédits. With the permission of Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company.
Photograph by Attila Kovács.

Ariel concludes with *Sonnet 66*: "And art made tongue-tied by authority, / And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill, / And simple truth miscalled simplicity, / And captive good attending captain ill" (9-12).[23] Even if the last two lines are missing, the audience is left in contemplation, there is no relief.

Lear premiered in 2019 in Debrecen Csokonai Theatre and was directed by Ilja Bocharnikovs. Debrecen (after Budapest) is the second biggest town in Hungary, and its theatre—just like in the case of other rural towns—mainly serves educational and entertaining purposes. Regular repertoire in such theatres include classical plays, musicals, operettas, and youth programmes for students. The director's concept, just like in the case of *The Tempest* discussed earlier, puts the mother figure and the parent-child relationship into the limelight. The dramaturg András Kozma used the 19th-century canonical translation by Mihály Vörösmarty as well as more contemporary versions by Miklós Mészöly, András Forgács and Ádám Nádasdy. In the text, Lear is referred to as a king, however, Anna Ráckevei, the leading actress of Csokonai Theatre, played a female ruler. Also, the role of the Fool and Oswald (Goneril's steward) is given to actresses, Fool being played by a woman has a long theatrical tradition,[24] so it is not surprising that it does not have a special relevance here, however, it changes the relationship between (female) Lear and her clown. They seem to be close friends at certain points, but at the peak of her black despair, Lear loses control and throttles her Fool who is her last connection to normal life and sanity.

The stage is rather dark during the whole play, and characters wear black and grey costumes. The exception is Cordelia, who is dressed in white from the beginning, but later, as the consequences of her decisions become clear, Lear gets a white gown as well. In the first scene, when the ruler divides her land between her daughters, the central prop on the stage is a table which also looks like a large double bed. The map is replaced with a double bed sheet (or

perhaps a blanket) which, at a certain point, Lear tears apart. This symbolizes the lost unity of the family, the corruption of the place of birth and the home. Later the same sheet is blown away by the wind in the storm. There is tense electronic music in the background which becomes more intense as the events progress.

Most of the reviews point out the lack of direct explanation or suggestion why an actress was chosen to play Lear. They highlight the dramaturgy's focusing on the parent-daughter relationship, viciousness, and indignity, however, this itself does not prove explanation for the choice.[25] Indeed, the concept remains neutral and weightless, it lacks political concerns and aspects. It is not made clear why Lear divides the kingdom, and their daughters do not seem to be greedy for wealth in the first place, they are driven by their desire to move far away from their despotic mother. As the plot is reaching its climax, the older daughters turn more and more despotic seemingly in direct consequence of what temperament they inherited from their mother and how they had been treated by her.

The dynamics of family relationships are definitely different as Lear is a mother here. In his interviews the director Ilya Bocharnikovs made it clear that his intention was to show toxic parental behaviour, ignoring King Lear's political themes. Relying on his own personal experiences, he wanted to make a play about the strong, dynamic, and painful emotions between a mother and her children. Thus, Lear in the play is an abusive mother harassing her daughters who are apparently afraid of her. This is made obvious at the outset of the play, when the land is divided, and the daughters must confess their love to their mother. Goneril and Reagan tell their speeches with rigid, anxious faces and gestures. As soon as they had done their parts, they look relieved as if the confession of their affection was merely a painful way to escape their mother's proximity. It is only Cordelia who tries to behave sincerely, alas, merits punishment and cruelty.

In this interpretation, rudeness and aggression are dominant in each character's behaviour. In the first scene, when Lear crudely disowns and disinherits Cordelia, the older sisters display honest worry and pity for their youngest sibling which suggests empathy based on experiencing a similar ill-treatment earlier. However, after receiving land and power, Goneril and Reagan transform from fearful to vengeful, angry characters increasingly cruel to their mother and to each other as well. Thus, the major cause for Lear's decline in the play is her pain, disappointment, and ultimately her failure as a mother, not the loss of her realm. Act 1 ends with Lear running up and down desperately on stage between Reagan to Cordelia while cursing the heavens.

After the storm scene (III.2), the four women appear as a family in a flashback vision of the past, Lear seeing her daughters as they were when small children. This is an idyllic episode with toys, games, a playground, some laughter, nostalgia, and soft piano music in which the young girls are competing for Lear's maternal attention and affection. Already, in these flash-back childhood scenes we can detect the signs of hierarchy, reward, and penalty indicating to the audience the reasons why parent-child relationship could have deteriorated. Behind the harmonious setting, there is a presentiment that intense situations within the family rooted in the past, and there is an emotional distance between the mother and her daughters. So, it is no surprise that in the first scene when the daughters must admit how much they love their mothers they seem frustrated and scared.

As it is argued by Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare "deconstructs the father-ruler" who loses patriarchy and parentage at the same time.[26] In

Bocharnikovs' *Lear*, however, authority is displayed in a different way, since there is no gender hierarchy between the mother and her daughters. What we see is parental and social hierarchy and the tyranny of a woman. In probably the most famous female stage interpretation of *Lear*, the protagonist was played by Kathryn Hunter directed by Helena Kaut-Howson in 1997. This production was affirmed to be "completely genderless" in which it was managed to switch the focus from gender to age.[27] For both the director and the actress the production was rather personal, but the production wanted to lay stress on the "universal meanings" of the play. Yet, with her physical and vocal performance, Hunter, as Klett remarks, managed to show a multifaceted and composite character which was androgynous, but not genderless, and destabilized both masculinity and femininity.[28]

When she was asked about the character, Ráckevei said that for her as an actress it did not really matter that Lear is a male role, because in the first place, he is a human being. She also added that the play represents the complexity of human nature with all its extremes, and the central figure is a strict and initially rational person whose decisions later become emotional, and thus, necessarily misguided and fails. In *Lear*, there is character development as well, because finally, the king is able to show regret and apologizes to Cordelia.[29]

As for her appearance, Ráckevei's Lear, with her short, slicked back hair and long black gown, is rather masculine. She is unquestionably a mother and a queen, strong-minded and strict in all of her functions. Her emotions on stage include anger, despair and regret, but she never seems to be too gentle or caring to anyone. Ráckevei's acting is passionate and emotional, she uses wide gestures and apparently concentrates on the clear articulation of Shakespeare's poetry. She uses vivid facial expressions, when she needs to put accent on an emotion, she makes her eyes wide open and stares tensely at the audience.



3. Anna Ráckevei (Lear) in *Lear* (2019).
Crédits. With the permission of Debrecen Csokonai Theatre.
Photograph by András Máté.

She often grabs her head while shouting thus emphasising the outburst quality of her voice. She shows how her heart breaks (I.4) with putting her palm on her chest while her body twitches as if she had real physical pain. With the soliloquies, she addresses the spectators. Her acting, at several points, recalls the romantic theatrical tradition of the 19th century which is in contrast with the production's modern scenery and gloomy atmosphere. The electronic music between

the scenes, the bizarre costumes, and some unusual objects on stage (a piano, for instance) create a modern vision in which this conventional, stylized acting is out of place, and hence, foregrounded. It seems as if the actress aimed at following some unwritten rules meriting the poetic text of Shakespeare.



4. Anna Ráckevei (Lear) in *Lear* (2019).
Crédits. With the permission of Debrecen Csokonai Theatre.
Photograph by András Máté.

As a conclusion it can be stated that in the examples discussed, there is nothing specific or political about the artistic/creative intention or the choice of an actress, it is rather a matter of curiosity. Due to the strict theatrical canon, cross-gender (Shakespeare) performances in Hungary are not only rare, but they do not facilitate any political or radically feminist interpretation. Re-gendering strengthens the norm and ensures that Shakespearean plays can remain within the well-known and comfortable mimetic setting. Even if there is the opportunity to reflect on the gender aspect of cross-casting or to challenge the ideas of femininity and masculinity, character interpretation and acting are kept in habitual framework. In *The Tempest* and the *Lear,* I discussed, male characters are acted and understood as if they were women, and their womanness is accentuated by bringing their personal narratives, emotions and the loss of their high status into the foreground. This proves how difficult it is to rewrite gender norms on the Hungarian stage, and also the way it looks at Shakespeare.

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Notes

[1] Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, the Theatre and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, London and New York, Routledge,1993, p. 23.

[2] Jean E. Howard, *op. cit*., p. 25.

[3] On Mary Frith and "the gender enigma" in Renaissance England, see Lesley Ferris, "Introduction: Current Crossings", in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, London and New York, Routledge,1993, p. 5-8.

[4] Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 33.

[5] An impressive selection of texts and interviews about the engagement of women with Shakespeare is collected in Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.), *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception, Performance*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014.

[6] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 29.

[7] Sarah Werner, *Shakespeare and Feminist Performance: Ideology on Stage*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 19.

[8] Penny Gay, "Changing Shakespeare: New Possibilities for the Modern Actress", in Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 321.

[9] Harriet Walter, "On the Donmar stage, all Shakespeare's players are women", *The Guardian* (15 October 2014). **URL**. Accessed 3 May 2023.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] Terri Power, *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 166-171.

[12] Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare and Gender: Sex and Sexuality in Shakespeare's Drama*, London, Bloomsbury, "The Arden Shakespeare", 2020, p. 70-71.

[13] Jennifer Rankin, "Hungary passes law banning LGBT content in schools or kids' TV", *The Guardian* (15 June 2021). **URL**. Accessed 15 February 2024.

[14] In a recent article, Judit Csáki, a leading Hungarian theatre critic analysed the repertoire of Hungarian state theatres in 2023/2024. She came to the conclusion that, despite the numerous new plays written, there are still not enough contemporary dramas on Hungarian stages, and the scene is haunted by the spirit of the 19th-century. See Judit Csáki, "Hányat írunk? Hol élünk? A kőszínházak bemutatói a 2023/2024-es évadban", *Revizor Online* (4 October 2023). **URL**. Accessed 18 February 2024.

[15] The situation and the status of Hungarian independent theatres is appropriately summarised by theatre critic Tamás Jászay. See Jászay Tamás, "Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre (Hungary)", *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques* (n°8, June 2013) (2013). **URL**. Accessed 18 February 2024.

[16] A recent example of cross-casting in a national drama was *The Tragedy of Man* directed by Kriszta Székely (Katona József Theatre, 2023) in which both Lucifer and God were played by actresses. According to my knowledge, this has never happened on Hungarian stages before. The reason that this is approved is that—just like in the case of Shakespeare's clowns—the biological sex of these roles is not as significant as their function.

[17] Eckart Voigts, "A Theatre of Attraction: Colonialism, Gender, and *The Tempest*'s Performance History", in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.) *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, London, Bloomsbury, "The Arden Shakespeare", 2014, p. 39.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 52.

[19] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 99.

[20] Virginia Mason Vaughan, "'Miranda, where's your mother?': Female Prosperos and What They Tell Us", in Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.), *Women Making Shakespeare, op. cit.,* p. 350. On Helen Mirren's Prospera, see also Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 87-114.

[21] Sándor Fazekas, "Vihar Gyulán", *Bárka Online* (25 July 2019). **URL**. Accessed 12 March 2024.

[22] Balázs Urbán, "Varázspálca nélkül", *Színház.net* (9 May 2019). **URL**. Accessed 12 March 2024.

[23] William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 66", in John Dover Wilson (ed.), *The Sonnets: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare* (3rd ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 35.

[24] Penny Gay, *op. cit*., p. 317.

[25] See Gerda Seres, "Mindegy, hogy melyik nem?", *Színház.net* (8 May 2019), Accessed 1 March 2024, **URL** or Gábor Bóta, "Embertelenség", *Népszava* (15 September 2019), **URL**. Accessed 1 March 2024.

[26] Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *op. cit*., p. 153-154.

[27] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 58.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[29] "Női Lear királlyal találkozhatnak a debreceniek a Csokonai Színházban", *Dehir.hu* (8 March 2019). **URL**. Accessed 1 March 2024.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

“Mad Composition!”: Gender, Historiography, and Performance in Royal Shakespeare Company Productions of *King John* (2012, 2019)

Par Elizabeth Dieterich
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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* revels in contradiction. Engaging with both the history and myth, Shakespeare positions nationalist rhetoric against a palpable ambivalence toward the legitimacy of the play's titular monarch. Audiences are ushered into a dangerously unstable version of Medieval England, where notions of divine right—crucial to defining English identity—are thrown into confusion. Though the "crown of England" might "prove" that John is the king (II.1.282), it is chaos that truly reigns.

In the chaotic world of *King John*, a plethora of symbols lose their meaning. A Bastard forsakes legitimation to be raised from obscurity into a place at court. A young Prince, England's hope against tyranny, meets a heartbreaking end. Unruly women speak out of turn. These ruptures and destabilizations of legitimacy and gender in Shakespeare's play have inspired two Royal Shakespeare Company productions of *King John*: one directed by Maria Aberg in 2012, and another directed by Eleanor Rhode in 2019. Both staged at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, these productions featured abstracted, modernised settings and innovative dramaturgical choices that illuminate Shakespeare's text. Notably, both productions feature actresses in traditionally male roles including the Bastard and King John himself, underscoring the re-evaluation of power dynamics and gender roles inherent to the play. This article argues that examining the innovative casting choices of these two productions will enhance and complicate our critical understandings of Shakespeare's engagement with historiography and gender in *King John.* Aberg's and Rhode's adaptations are vital catalysts for expanding our perspective on Shakespeare's work; these productions challenge and expand our perceptions of *King John* and highlight the play's relevance and adaptability to modern discourses of identity and authority.

KEYWORDS

King John, Roi Jean, the Bastard, Shakespeare, nationalism, metatheatre, performance, adaptation, gender, performativity, legitimacy, England, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Maria Aberg, Eleanor Rhode, Pippa Nixon, Alex Waldmann, Rosie Sheehy

RÉSUMÉ

La vie et la mort du roi Jean de William Shakespeare se délecte de la contradiction. S'engageant à la fois dans l'Histoire et dans le mythe, Shakespeare oppose la rhétorique nationaliste à une ambivalence palpable à l'égard de la légitimité du monarque éponyme. Les spectateurs sont plongés dans une version dangereusement instable de l'Angleterre médiévale, où les notions de droit divin — essentielles à la définition de l'identité anglaise — deviennent confuses. Bien que la « couronne d'Angleterre » puisse « prouver » que Jean est le roi (II.1.282), c'est le chaos qui règne véritablement.

Dans le monde chaotique du *Roi Jean*, de nombreux de symboles perdent leur signification. Un bâtard renonce à la légitimation pour sortir de l'obscurité et se faire une place à la cour. Un jeune prince, espoir de l'Angleterre contre la tyrannie, connaît une fin déchirante. Des femmes indisciplinées prennent la parole à tort et à travers. Ces ruptures et ces déstabilisations de la légitimité et du genre dans la pièce de Shakespeare ont inspiré deux productions du *Roi Jean* par la Royal Shakespeare Company : l'une dirigée par Maria Aberg en 2012, et l'autre dirigée par

Eleanor Rhode en 2019. Toutes deux mises en scène au Swan Theatre de Stratford-upon-Avon, ces productions présentent des décors abstraits et modernisés, ainsi que des choix dramaturgiques innovants qui éclairent le texte de Shakespeare. En particulier, les deux productions mettent en scène des actrices dans des rôles traditionnellement masculins, notamment le Bâtard et le roi Jean lui-même, soulignant ainsi la réévaluation de la dynamique du pouvoir et des rôles genrés inhérente à la pièce. Cet article soutient que l'examen des choix de distribution innovants de ces deux productions améliore et complique notre compréhension critique de l'engagement de Shakespeare avec l'historiographie et le genre dans *Le Roi Jean*. Les adaptations d'Aberg et de Rhode sont des catalyseurs essentiels pour élargir notre perspective sur l'œuvre de Shakespeare ; ces productions remettent en question et élargissent nos perceptions du *Roi Jean*, tout en soulignant la pertinence et l'adaptabilité de la pièce aux discours modernes sur l'identité et l'autorité.

MOTS-CLÉS

King John, le Bâtard, Shakespeare, nationalisme, métathéâtre, mise en scène, adaptation, genre, performativité, légitimité, Angleterre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Maria Aberg, Eleanor Rhode, Pippa Nixon, Alex Waldmann, Rosie Sheehy

Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (first performed c. 1596) invites its audience into a dangerously unstable version of Medieval England where divine right, authority, and gender roles are thrown into confusion.[1] The play juxtaposes radical nationalism with anxious ambivalence toward the legitimacy of the crown. Among Shakespeare's plays, however, *King John* is a bit of an outlier and is sometimes dismissed by artists and scholars alike as being poorly constructed or confusing.[2] Indeed, it seems almost obligatory for scholarship on *King John* to begin by noting how understudied and seldom performed it is.[3] This outlier status makes some sense from both literary and historical perspectives. John "Lackland"—so-called because, as a youngest son, he was not expected to inherit any territories—is remembered as a volatile and poor ruler overshadowed by his father, Henry II, his brother, Richard the Lionhearted, and his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In modern media, he is often portrayed as a schemer or cartoonish villain.[4] For students of history, John's reign is primarily remembered for the episode in which he was forced to sign Magna Carta, which limited the monarch's power—a moment that Shakespeare's play omits.

For contemporary theatre practitioners, however, the play's perceived flaws can provide space to work dramaturgical magic free from audience preconceptions that accompany more famous Shakespearean works. In the 2010s, two Royal Shakespeare Company productions seized upon the opportunity to creatively recontextualize the play's themes. Maria Aberg's 2012 production and Eleanor Rhode's 2019 production, both staged at the RSC's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, engage with contemporary issues of gender and politics, most notably through the casting of women in major roles traditionally played by men. This article examines how Aberg's choice to cast Pippa Nixon as the Bastard and Rhode's decision to cast Rosie Sheehy as King John, rather than being distracting anachronisms or failed experiments against type, align closely with the themes of Shakespeare's text.[5] The metatheatricality, ambivalence, and historiographic concerns of *King John*, as well as its inherent interest in gender, all become strikingly legible when illuminated by the dramaturgical approaches of Aberg and Rhode.[6] These productions underscore the play's ambivalence regarding legitimacy and the authority of the state and highlight its metatheatrical approach to history. By emphasising the play's self-reflexive historiography, the Aberg and Rhode productions of *King John* invite the audience to see history—with a view from both Shakespeare's era and from modernity—as a narrative that is always actively being performed.

In Shakespeare's *King John*, legitimacy is a fluid, arbitrary concept. In this way, Shakespeare's play contrasts other plays about the same monarch that were composed in the late sixteenth century. John Bale's morality *Kynge Johan* (1538) and the anonymous *Troublesome Reign of King John* (c. 1589) took the king's (anachronistic) anti-Catholicism and absolute attitude about divine right to the extreme.[7] Rather than completely assert John's legitimacy as king, Shakespeare takes a characteristically "two-eyed" view of his subject, seeing John as both a sort-of proto-Protestant hero *and* a weak usurper and leveraging the ambivalence with which the playwright crafts all his histories.[8] John occupies the throne *de facto* but not necessarily *de jure*—by his "strong possession much more than [his] right"—as his mother, Queen Eleanor, reminds him (I.1.40).[9] Like Eleanor, the play simultaneously champions John while repeatedly asserting that he is *not* the rightful king of England—ultimately failing to assert whether his legitimacy actually matters in the end. Beyond monarchical legitimacy, Shakespeare shows that personal legitimacy within society is similarly arbitrary and mutable. Through the character of the Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, the play explores the similarities and articulations between monarchical and personal legitimacy and the role of an individual within the body politic. The 2012 and 2019 RSC productions amplify the play's ambivalence through abstraction and anachronism both in their

design and by casting young actresses in the roles of a female Bastard (for Aberg) and a masculine-leaning-but-gender-fluid King John (for Rhode).

It was the project of Tudor history plays—a genre invented by the playwrights of Shakespeare's era—to define 'Englishness' in opposition to outside threats and stoke nationalism in English audiences.[10] For most of Shakespeare's histories, this project of nationalist fervour is articulated through stirring speeches from historical figures such as John of Gaunt, Henry Bolingbroke, Prince Hal, or Thomas Cranmer. In *King John*, however, the play's most cogent nationalist arguments come from a figure *outside* the historical record: the Bastard. The character of the Bastard underscores how the play is unique in its historiographic approach and how it "mocks and inverts the themes, conventions, and strategies generally associated with the history play."[11] For this reason, Virginia Mason Vaughan goes as far as to explicitly call King John "Shakespeare's postmodern history play."[12] The Bastard bridges the audience and the play's action, guiding them through John's tumultuous reign and creating an almost-Brechtian distancing effect through which the audience is invited to share in the play's ambivalence. After John loses his disastrous war with France and dies, not valiantly in battle, but when he is poisoned by an English monk, it is the Bastard who concludes the play with a stirring speech about what it means for him—and potentially for the audience—to be English and fight for England:

> This England never did nor never shall
> Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror
> But when it first did help to wound itself.
> Now these her princes are come home again,
> Come the three corners of the world in arms
> And we shall shock them. Naught shall make us rue,
> If England to itself do rest but true. (V.7.118-124)

As Brian Carroll writes, *King John*, and the character of the Bastard in particular, "encourage[s] playgoers to think of themselves as individuals with the agency necessary to *choose* nation rather than merely exist as subjects whose nation chose them."[13] The Bastard's liminal position between audience and action, coupled with the character's centrality to the play's metatheatrical historiography practically invites the sort of "non-traditional" approach that Maria Aberg takes in casting Pippa Nixon in the part. While other characters from the play are lifted from history, the Bastard, in Marsha Robinson's words, "has no legitimate relationship to the past […] neither a bias to support nor a historiographic model to uphold."[14] Not only does the historiography of *King John* chart new territory, but the Bastard's insider-outsider status, with no "legitimate relationship" to the history he comments on, mirrors Shakespeare's own self-fashioned position in Elizabethan society.[15] The Bastard's position in society evolves from his modest birth, to accepting outright his illegitimacy, to rising to the king's inner circle.

Shakespeare's Bastard Philip Faulconbridge is in part a composite of documented, high-ranking mediaeval- and Reformation-era bastards and in part an invention of the Tudor era.[16] As A. J. Piesse writes, the Bastard is "utterly unlike any other kind of character in the canon" and through him "Shakespeare is deliberately drawing attention to the conventions of playing and […] writing history," since the character "observes events as they transpire and translates the rhetoric in which they are framed as historic deeds into a language that penetrates the pretensions of kings and princes."[17] Philip's younger brother, Robert claims Philip's land under the accusation that his elder brother's father was not Sir Robert Faulconbridge, but King Richard I. King John resolves the dispute by legitimising Philip according to the conclusion that his

parents were married when he was born. However, recognizing Philip's similarities to Richard the Lionhearted, Queen Eleanor offers Philip a choice: to "be a Faulconbridge / And […] to enjoy [his] land" or to be "the reputed son of Coeur de Lion," which would make him a Bastard, merely the "Lord of [his own] presence, and no land besides" (I.1.137-140). The Bastard leaps at the chance to shake the provincial dust from his feet and join Eleanor and John in their war against France. Although the Bastard acclimates his "mounting spirit" to his role in the royal family, he retains a core hybridity—simultaneously having been legitimised by the king and having rejected his legitimation—remaining, in his words, "a bastard to the time" (I.1.212-13). Pippa Nixon's portrayal of the Bastard highlights the character's insider-outsider position; both the gender change of the character and Nixon's characterisation call the audience's attention to the ways in which the Bastard personifies the play's interest in historiography, legitimacy, and gender dynamics.[18]

Aberg's production of *King John* was staged as part of the RSC's 2012 "Nations at War" trilogy, along with *A Soldier in Every Son: The Rise of the Aztecs* and *Richard III*.[19] Staged alongside these plays, Aberg's production prompts audiences to consider the function and scope of history plays and global politics. Furthermore, changes to gender through casting modernise, highlight, and complicate the aspects of Shakespeare's project I have described above.[20] In an interview with *The Guardian*, Aberg explains that her choice to cast the Bastard as a woman "'started off with a curiosity about seeing a woman tackling what is, in a cliched way, a very masculine part.'"[21] While gender changes in contemporary productions of Shakespeare are commonplace, in Nixon's words, her character has also been "reinvent[ed]" for this production.[22] Aberg differentiates her casting choice from other gender changes in prior Shakespeare productions, explaining that Nixon's role is "'quite different from, say, Kathryn Hunter or Fiona Shaw playing a Shakespearean king.'"[23] Perhaps it is because of the "cliched masculine" aspects of the character of the Bastard that casting a young, energetic woman like Nixon "'changed the dynamic between the characters quite profoundly.'" However, what might seem like seismic changes to the play instead reveal core aspects of the play's interests in gender. A female Bastard, Aberg says, "'backs up [Eleanor] and Constance, following their thought into action, and making the women the heart and strength of the play.'"[24] Nixon's characterisation is distinctly feminine; her costume consists of a base of brightly coloured, geometrically patterned leggings and a short, sleeveless black dress, beginning the play by singing, accompanying herself on the ukulele.[25] Her behaviour onstage exudes energy and power coded with a sense of femininity that highlights underlying gender politics and, particularly in her interactions with Alex Waldmann's King John, sexual tensions of Shakespeare's text.

Act II of *King John* begins with the armies of England and France meeting in front of the town of Angiers in France is a catalyst for much of the play's action and highlights its concerns with gender. King John and King Philip of France debate which of them has further overextended the legitimate bounds of his divinely ordained authority to rule (II.1.119-120). Their argument is quickly monopolised by Queen Eleanor (Siobhan Redmond) and Constance (Susie Trayling), the widow of John's older brother Geoffrey and mother of rival claimant to the English throne, Arthur. As Eleanor and Constance insult each other's sons, themes of gender and legitimacy converge:

> QUEEN ELEANOR. Who is it thou dost call usurper, France?
> CONSTANCE. Let me make answer: thy usurping son.
> QUEEN ELEANOR. Out, insolent! Thy bastard shall be king
> That thou mayst be a queen and check the world.
> CONSTANCE. … My boy a bastard? By my soul, I think

His father never was so true begot.
It cannot be, an if thou wert his mother. (II.1.121-124, 130-132)

As Phyllis Rackin writes, in *King John*, the power of speeches by Eleanor and Constance "exposes, like nothing else in any of Shakespeare's histories, the arbitrary and conjectural nature of patriarchal succession and the suppressed centrality of women to it."[26] Adding the voice of Nixon's Bastard to the debate between Eleanor and Constance amplifies this suppressed centrality and legitimises female voices in discourse.[27] Since Nixon dons a tuxedo jacket over her black dress for this scene, audience members might suspect at first that the character has taken on a masculine quality, but this is quickly proven not to be so. Following the barbs of Eleanor and Constance, the Bastard and Austria enter the fray, trading threats. Louis the Dauphin interjects, demanding, "Women and fools, break off your conference!" (II.1.153). In Louis' binate epithet—"[w]omen and fools"—"women" has three obvious referents (Eleanor, Constance, and the Bastard), making "fools" apparently aimed at the three *men* on the stage who have been arguing—Austria, Philip, and John. While the men heed the Dauphin, Eleanor and Constance are unwilling to submit and are immediately at each other's throats again, personally insulting each other and invoking their knowledge of the law in their debate.

The authority that Constance and Eleanor wield in Shakespeare's original text—their wilfulness, their knowledge of the law—is underscored in Aberg's adaptation by Nixon's outspoken Bastard, who values raw power as much as Eleanor and Constance value the law. In an aside, while all other actors freeze in place, Nixon's Bastard declares her desire to see "the rich blood of kings … set on fire" (II.1.365).[28] The Bastard is bored by the tepid response of the Citizens of Angiers and long-winded debate over who is the king. The Bastard's reveals her plan for a fiery display of *de facto* power that demonstrates the production's deft use of metatheatre. In both Aberg's and Rhode's productions, multiple actors appear on the balconies of the Swan Theatre beside audience members to deliver the Citizens' lines. Implicating the theatre's actual audience in the noncommittal response of the Citizens who stand beside them, she declares, "By heaven, these scroyles of Angiers flout you kings, / And stand securely on their battlements / *As in a theatre*, whence they gape and point" (II.1.673-676, emphasis mine).[29] This moment demonstrates the commitment to metatheatre in Shakespeare's text and the underlying implication that politics affects the entire social body—a theme that Eleanor Rhode doubles down on in her 2019 production, which I will discuss below.

In Aberg's production, and in the scenes at Angiers specifically, feminine energy fills the aural and visual landscape that helps reveal more of what is at stake as far as gender in *King John*.[30] Throughout the production, the play's tightly controlled verse lines are expanded or contracted to accommodate for the gender of Nixon's Bastard.[31] Visually, the wedding scene between Louis the Dauphin (Oscar Pearce) and Blanche (Natalie Klamar) is a frothy array of pastel colours and sumptuous fabrics. Blanche floats across the stage in a wedding dress supported by layers of pink tulle puffing out from under her skirt; Eleanor (Siobhan Redmond) wears a satin gown that glows under the stage lights. The exuberant wedding feast is represented by a music and dancing interlude full of pop songs made famous by female singers. The ensemble performs karaoke to "Say a Little Prayer for You," then "(I've Had) The Time of My Life" plays and Louis hoists Blanche high in the air for an impressive re-creation of the famous *Dirty Dancing* move, after which the ensemble exits to Rihanna's "We Found Love." Throughout this pop-culture-inflected interlude, Nixon's Bastard presides like a Lord of Misrule. She both participates in the festivities and remains slightly outside them, bridging the audience and the ensemble.[32] As the revellers gather on the upstage steps, the Bastard pauses and raises a camera to photograph them. While she facilitates the commemoration of the event, the Bastard is conspicuously

outside the "official" record of the wedding. The ensemble freezes for the picture while Nixon delivers the play's famous speech on "Commodity," the "vile-drawing bias" that lures kings away from "resolved and honorable war" (II.1.605-613). The juxtaposition of pop femininity through the music and dancing alongside the Bastard's explication of the dishonourable "commodity" exchange—in which Blanche has been traded alongside commodities of land and titles—colours the Bastard's monologue in new shades. In this context, the Bastard's speech lays bare how dependent the State is on the participation of women's bodies in its machinations. By retaining her own agency as a woman and a liminal participant in the affairs of the State, Nixon's Bastard holds the production back from a sheer drop into a patriarchal abyss. While Blanche cannot escape the clutches of patriarchal rule once she is married to the Dauphin, Nixon's Bastard adds her voice to the counter-patriarchal speeches delivered by Constance later in the play. Aberg's production underscores the "suppressed centrality" of women's voices in the original text by breaking open that text so that the Bastard, as Aberg puts it, "backs up" the other women in the play.[33]

Nixon's Bastard is conflated with the play's secondary mouthpiece in voicing its concerns over legitimacy, authority, and power: Hubert. Conflating the roles of the Bastard and Hubert has an effect like *doubling*—having one actor play multiple different roles in the same play.[34] Conflating these characters suggests, in the same way doubling does, that both Hubert and the Bastard are defined by the narratives imposed upon them.[35] However, both Hubert and the Bastard enjoy similarly intimate relationships with King John—an intimacy that's amplified when they are the same person. In a review of Aberg's play, Peter Kirwan points out how Nixon's casting "lent extraordinary resonance to the play's constant talk of love," which is particularly legible in John's scenes with Hubert, or in this case, Nixon's Bastard.[36] When the king manipulates Hubert into agreeing to kill the imprisoned Prince Arthur, John and Hubert exchange a series of short phrases, sharing what amounts to an *almost* complete line of verse:

> KING JOHN. Death
> HUBERT. My lord?
> KING JOHN. A grave.
> HUBERT. He will not live. (III.3.70-3)

Sharing lines of verse ramps up intimacy between characters. On the early modern stage, shared verse lines would have raised the tension in the playhouse. Shakespeare's audiences, highly attuned to aural cues, would be gripped by listening to this quick exchange of short syllables.[37] After Hubert's line, John breaks the tension of the moment with the extra-metrical "Enough" (III.3.74). The king continues: "Hubert, I love thee." He then begins a new, complete verse line: "Well, I'll not say what I intend for thee" (III.3.75-6). The script for this production changes the final line of their dialogue slightly, first omitting "Hubert," but then updating the rest of the line with the more modern (if also, technically, more formal) "I love *you*."[38] The way Waldmann's John gazes upon his scene partner's face and the way in which he intones "what I intend for thee" makes it clear that his intentions are romantic. This overt romantic-sexual dynamic between John and the Bastard in this scene is underscored by the relative youth of the two actors. As Peter Kirwan writes, "Waldmann was a young and reckless king, openly sexual in his behaviour."[39] Typically, John is played by a middle-aged or older man (the Bastard's age varies), but at the time of this production, both Waldmann and Nixon were in their early thirties—though their expressive energy makes them seem even younger.[40] Such overt sexual tension between John and the Bastard potentially reveals a bond of affection between John and his closest advisors that is latent in Shakespeare's text but is easily obscured by heteronormativity.[41]

The sexually charged dynamic between the two characters also reveals a volatile power imbalance between Nixon's Bastard and Waldmann's John. In the fourth act of Shakespeare's play, misunderstandings over whether Hubert—or in Aberg's production, the Bastard—has fulfilled John's orders for Arthur's murder (which were not carried out) clashes with John's shame and regret at ordering the boy's death (which eventually occurs anyway). John becomes enraged with Hubert. In Aberg's production, the ensuing scene between John and the Bastard was channelled into a deeply disturbing sequence of sexually motivated violence. Peter Kirwan's review of the play describes the actors' "terrified energy" as Waldmann's John, "enraged and terrified, grabbed hold of the woman he 'loved' and proceeded to enact an abortive rape on her, wrenching at her breasts and pinning her to the floor as she sobbed in simultaneous pain and regret."[42] Such a moment is, of course, still conceivable in a production in which Hubert is played by an actor of the same gender as John, but in this scene, the hyper-legibility of the heteroerotic sexual tension between these characters is extreme. The scene intensifies the sexual power dynamics lurking under the surface of Shakespeare's play and shifts the language of the scene to bring the sexual—and moreover, political—power dynamics of the play into focus. John's accusatory line blaming Hubert for his plan to kill Arthur, "Hadst not thou been by, / A fellow by the hand of nature marked … This murder had not come into my mind" (IV.2.231-234), is partly changed to "[a] *woman* by the hand of nature marked."[43] In Shakespeare's text, this line implies that Hubert is ugly, deformed, or even disabled.[44] Aberg's revision, however, means that Waldmann's John appears to blame the Bastard's *femininity*—the way in which she is marked *as a woman* by the hand of nature. In an attempt to subdue the femininity that has led him astray, Waldmann's John attacks and grapples with Nixon's Bastard, sitting atop her, pinning her hands. While John asserts his physical power over the Bastard in this scene, the RSC's *Prompt Book* has a handwritten note alongside the scene stating that it is here that "the balance of power between KJ + B shifts."[45] This shift occurs moments after their grappling, when the Bastard is finally able to explain that Arthur is alive. John begs the Bastard for forgiveness, hugging her in the final lines of the scene.[46]

As Aberg's production progresses, it solidifies links between the femininity of Nixon's Bastard, its ambivalent view of legitimacy, and its critique of misogyny, in part through the relationship between Nixon's character and Prince Arthur. Shakespeare's play suggests that Arthur of Brittany is not only rightful heir to the throne by Tudor understandings of primogeniture, but that he is also *more fit t*o be the king of England than his "unnatural uncle" John (II.1.10).[47] Captured by the English and sentenced to die, Arthur gracefully talks his way out of getting his eyes brutally extracted by a hot iron; his persuasive and gentle nature wins Hubert, his would-be-assassin, over. Arthur is graceful and brave in the face of inescapable mortal danger. Since, in Aberg's production, Hubert is subsumed into the character of the Bastard, Arthur's lines in the would-be-execution scene are changed to call Nixon's Bastard "cousin" instead of "Hubert"; the Bastard's lines are changed from "your uncle" to "our uncle."[48] Arthur has a familial intimacy with the Bastard, but, unlike John, he treats her with respect and affection instead of with misogyny and violence. However, after the Bastard leaves him (and tells John the boy is alive) Arthur attempts to escape by jumping from his prison walls, reasoning that it is "[a]s good to die and go as die and stay" a prisoner (IV.3.8). As he falls, Arthur cries out that his uncle John is "in these stones" (IV.3.9). As A. J. Piesse writes, Arthur has an "implicit understanding of the extent of John's unfitness" and the simultaneous inevitability of the usurper's rule. John and England are inextricably, even physically, linked, but "instead of the nurturing, nourishing, fertile land so frequently invoked in the history plays, England," and by association John himself, "is death-dealing stones."[49] When the Bastard finds Arthur's body, she laments:

> From forth this morse of dead royalty,
> The life, the right, and truth of all this realm
> Is fled to heaven, and England now is left
> To tug and scamble and to part by th' teeth
> The unowed interest of proud-swelling state. (IV.3.150-155)

In Shakespeare's text, this speech happens within a conversation between Hubert and the Bastard, but since Nixon is playing both characters, she delivers the lines alone onstage and her soliloquy draws the audience into her articulation of Arthur as the "[t]he life, the right, and truth" of England. Next to this speech in the RSC *Prompt Book* there is a note: "B binds herself to England's future."[50] When the Bastard returns to John with news of Arthur's death, John gives the Bastard "the ordering of this present time" (V.1.79). The RSC *Prompt Book* notes that, through this decree, "KJ gives B [permission] to speak for England."[51] The dramaturgical choices that Aberg makes in the second half of this production stress how King John loses his authority as the play progresses. Collapsing together Hubert and the Bastard into the character played by Pippa Nixon not only expands and emphasises the roles of women in the play from merely being mothers and wives, but also demonstrates how self-fashioned political agency can be inflected with both boldness—as the Bastard demonstrates in battle—and care—as the Bastard demonstrates in relation to Arthur.

The stage design of Aberg's production, by Naomi Dawson, without a throne or any court scenery strips away the grandeur typically associated with monarchy and aims the audience's focus directly at the bodies of actors. Meanwhile, the minimalist set pieces that are used take on great symbolic value. In John's second coronation scene, the backdrop, made up of dozens of glowing multicoloured balloons, is released across the stage along with confetti. John stands unmoving in the blue light of an empty stage while Wye Oak's song "Civilian" plays and balloons scatter around him.[52] The back wall of the Swan Theatre is revealed, where a neon sign reads, in an all-lower-case script, "*for god and england*." This reminder of the historiographic, religious, and political interests of the play loom over the second half of the production, including the scenes of John's reconciliation with Rome and the Bastard's receiving of "the ordering of this present time" (V.1.79). King John succumbs to poison in the final scene of the production, which the *Prompt Book* notes is "simultaneously—a nightmare, or a hallucination."[53] A cacophony of voices spread news of John's poisoning by a monk while the song "Beggin'" by The Four Seasons plays. [54] Waldmann staggers around the stage wrenching at his clothes while the "*for god and england*" sign flickers and the remaining balloons bounce aimlessly around the stage.



1. Alex Waldmann as King John in Maria Aberg's 2012 production.
Crédits. Photo by Keith Pattison, RSC. Used with permission of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

His mental and physical decline suggests that even the legitimacy of a king can be eroded or lost over time—flickering in and out, flimsy as a balloon. He finally collapses, crawls across the stage, and ends up in the Bastard's arms, creating a *Pieta*-like tableau, and dies. The young Prince Henry picks up John's crown and stands apart while Nixon delivers the Bastard's final speech. This version of the speech, however, omits two lines: "But when it first did help to wound itself. / Now these her princes are come home again" (V.7.120-121). Instead of focusing on the disastrous war that has raged on for the entire play, Aberg's production ends with a clear declaration of England's commitment to move on from the disastrous reign of the weak King John and "to itself […] rest but true" (V.7.124).[55] In her final speech, Nixon's Bastard emphasises her hard-won political and historiographic authority—even if the specificities of "This England" remain a bit uncertain.

Even before the Bastard's final speech, an audience member at *King John* will hear the word "England" more times than in any other of Shakespeare's works.[56] Such a clear focus on the State of England is to be expected from Shakespeare's "most political play."[57] *King John* is the play in which Shakespeare is *most* interested in unpacking the idea of "*this England*", but Michael Gadaleto raises a crucial question on this point: "But what England exactly? These lines […] have been much debated, with critics often wondering how to square their closing patriotic message of national unity and self-reliance with the rest of this most 'troublesome' history."[58] Contemporary productions, particularly Aberg's and Rhode's RSC productions, help uncover the play's capacity to force its audience to confront what "This England" can mean.[59] Gadaleto writes that the England of Shakespeare's *King John* "at last arrives at a surer knowledge of what

it is" by the play's conclusion.[60] While this may be the case in Shakespeare's text, both Aberg's and Rhode's stagings of the play explode the possibility of any such concrete conclusion; "This England" can come to mean a multitude of different things *or* be a perpetually unstable notion. By pressuring the play to reveal how it disrupts notions of nationalism, historiography, gender, and performance, the dramaturgical choices of these productions force us not just to reconfigure our scholarly understanding of the play, but of the impact that Shakespearean adaptation can have in modernity.[61]

In a behind-the-scenes video interview by the RSC, Aberg states that she intended her production to remind audiences of the "greed and fickleness" of irresponsible politicians in the present day.[62] In the same interview, John Stahl (King Philip of France), reflects on how much the indecisiveness of politicians reminds him of the 2012 debates between the Scottish Parliament and David Cameron's government in London and compares between the rapidly shifting allegiances in Shakespeare's play and the contemporary 24-hour news cycle.[63] However, Aberg's production resists directly representing any specific political moment, instead retaining an ambiguously contemporary era featuring costumes and set pieces that would not be out of place either in the 1980s or in a heavily-filtered Instagram feed of 2012.[64] The play, which is *technically* set in the Middle Ages, evokes various points in British history (1200s, 1980s, 2012), and in this way forces the spectator to reckon with *which* England, exactly, "This England" refers to, and which associations they ought to bring to their spectatorship of the action. The Middle Ages, "Bad" King John, Magna Carta, Shakespeare's London, Thatcher's Britain, and the unknowns of a New Millennium all tumble together. Nixon's Bastard, a character jolted from cliched masculinity to raucous femininity, revels so thoroughly in the carnivalesque setting that the audience is meant to understand that the very notion of "This England" has always been inherently unstable.

Given the rarity of productions of *King John*, it is interesting that the Royal Shakespeare Company decided to mount another production of the play only seven years after Aberg's. Eleanor Rhode's 2019 *King John* similarly focuses on the disruption of the play's gender politics by casting Rosie Sheehy as King John. However, striking differences between the two productions demonstrate how different, even contradictory, approaches can reveal how multifaceted the play is. While Aberg's production was a pop-inflected, exuberant journey through an unstable landscape, Rhode's production is significantly darker, doubling down on the arbitrariness of political power and the abject despair of a country governed by incompetent rulers. In many ways, the structure and script of the play are more 'faithful' to the original text, but the gender change of King John reveals much about how the play's ambivalence, historiography, and metatheatricality remain relevant in the modern era. The darkness at the heart of the production is legible in large part through the family dynamics, which reveal both the domestic nature of the political and highlight the intersection between gender and politics. Connections to 2019 Britain creep in; Josie Rourke, another RSC director, has claimed that *King John* is "the perfect Brexit play," and, indeed, the production coincided with Britain's official exit from the European Union in January 2020.[65] Of her approach, Rhode says, "The way I've approached it is to look at this play […] as a family at war [since] the state of the nation begins at home."[66] The production maintains dynamic interplay between the State, the family, and the individual as it addresses themes of ambivalence and gender fluidity.

The lights come up on a domestic scene as Sheehy's King John, hungover from his coronation, ambles through a destroyed party scene quaffing a Bloody Mary (complete with raw egg) in his bathrobe while the radio broadcasts the BBC. From Sheehy's appearance and costume, it seems at first as if John might instead be a *queen*, but the audience soon hears Sheehy's character

referred to as "King" and "him." Unlike in many other gender-crossed, swapped, or changed roles in Shakespeare, Sheehy plays her role as male.[67] Sheehy herself describes the character's gender not as binary but "'fluid," saying, "'I sort of just play him as me.'"[68] Sheehy's long hair cascades in a high ponytail throughout much of the play, and her costumes convey neither masculinity nor femininity. In contrast to Aberg's, Rhode's production plays on the *fluidity* of gender rather than highlighting gender binaries or underscoring the female strength in the play.[69] The differences between the semiotic registers of the two productions highlight the vast potential for interpretation for this play so deeply invested in destabilising semiotic order. The contrast between the visual and rhetorical signs of Sheehy's King John—her feminine body and male pronouns—force the audience to reckon with the deep ambivalence of *King John* and with the reality that gender is a performance uncoupled from bodily signifiers.[70]

The abstracted visual landscape of the production, designed by Max Johns, leans toward 1960-70s Britain. Unlike in Aberg's production, there is no literal sign upstage to explicitly remind the characters (and audience) that they strive "*for god and England*." Instead, a different kind of 'sign' looms over the play in the form of a backdrop with a giant, mediaeval-style drawing of Sheehy staring out from under a large crown and looking much younger than she appears onstage—almost childlike (even though Sheehy is in her twenties in this production; like Waldmann, quite young for an actor playing King John). The spectral presence of this girlish image looms over the stage for the entirety of the play, creating a parallel between this representation of John and the boy Arthur and suggesting that whether the king is one child or another, it hardly matters. The ambivalence with which the production begins turns to despair with the marriage of Louis (Brian Martin) and Blanche (Nadi Kemp-Sayfi). While Aberg's wedding scene was joyful, in Rhode's production Louis and Blanche are outwardly antagonistic throughout the ensemble's tightly choreographed dance sequences set to hauntingly instrumental jazz. The Bastard's (Michael Abubakar) "Commodity" speech occurs *before* the wedding in this production (in its textually faithful place), and so his incredulousness at the shifting whims of monarchs is detached from the marriage. Instead, the wedding is simply deeply, arbitrarily, uncomfortable. In the aftermath of Cardinal Pandulph's (Katherine Pearce) visit and John's excommunication, a series of balloons spelling out "JUST MARRIED" are popped and the remaining balloons are slightly rearranged to spell "JUST DIE." There is no love lost between the royal families of Rhode's *King John*. The flippancy demonstrated by Sheehy's John in arranging and presiding over the non-consensual wedding of Blanche to Louis in pursuit of "Commodity" demonstrates that patriarchy is a force not limited to certain kinds of bodies, ages, or genders but that patriarchy, wielded by the ruling class to maintain power, pervades society from the top down. And the production offers little in the way of hope in light of such a system.

Throughout Rhode's production, the stage space darkens as John falls from grace with England and with God as he attempts to tighten his grasp on power. The shift into literal and metaphorical darkness at first appears to align with a shift into femininity for Sheehy's John, since, in the re-coronation scene of the fourth act, Sheehy dons a ballgown. The costume design threatens the audience with the notion that the feminine or the queer are inherently destructive.[71]



2. Rosie Sheehy as King John and the Company in *King John* from Eleanor Rhode's 2019 Production.
Crédits. Photo by Steve Tanner, RSC. Used with permission of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

However, the choreography and characterization as John falls from grace makes it clear that is not the *fault* of John's femininity, masculinity, or gender-fluidity but that he is a bad king because he obstinately clings to unnecessary displays of *de facto* power, such as this unnecessary second coronation. Sheehy's John sits high on a throne directly below the girlish backdrop behind him with an expression of scorn and pride, underscoring how he really is, as the Bastard will say in the following scene, the "proud-swelling state" (IV.3.155). The Lords Pembroke and Salisbury express incredulity at John's display of "wasteful and ridiculous excess" that comes at "a time unseasonable" and sows distrust in the nation (IV.2.16, 20). As in the wedding scene, the second coronation explicitly demonstrates how every *body* is equally susceptible to patriarchy, misogyny, and to enacting poor leadership.

The postmodern arbitrariness of the play continues with its lack of closure. Unlike the final scene of Aberg's production where King John collapsed, Christ-like, in a cacophonous fever dream, the death of Sheehy's King John death is bleak and hyper-realistic. While Hubert (Tom McCall) looks on, the poisoned King John shakes in a small metal bathtub, sputtering his final speech while blood bubbles on his lips and pools underneath him. The king's death is not communicated through the telling- and re-telling of rumours, as with Waldmann's John. Instead, it is visceral and immediate. In its closing scene, Rhode's production has a final subversion to make to Shakespeare's text: Rhode has omitted the part of young Henry III altogether. The play, then, ends in ambiguity. John is dead, Arthur is dead, and the audience is left to wonder who the king will be now, since no one steps up to fill the void John has left. The Bastard delivers his final monologue with the same cynical tone he has used throughout the production, then leads the ensemble in a dirge, singing lyrics from Wilfred Owen's poem "Futility."[72] The subsequent tableau suggests that the Bastard's prediction for English steadfastness, that "[n]aught shall make us rue, / If England to itself do rest but true" is mistaken (V.7.123-4).

To close the play, the screen upstage rises and the characters from the French contingent burst forth from fog and smoke to engage in combat with English characters. Their battle surrounds the body of Sheehy's John, motionless in the bathtub, his gold crown resting on his chest. The implication of the tableau is that the French win the fight, since, after about a minute, what appear to be the ghosts of Constance and Prince Arthur appear victorious. Constance, smiling,

takes up John's crown and offers it to her son. The stage goes dark. This ending to Rhode's production confirms, first, the sense in Shakespeare's text that John was *never* the rightful king, but also reminds the audience that all histories rewrite the history that they tell. This ending establishes an intertextual framework in which the audience can read a painful arc of English history—one where, indeed, England does often "help to wound itself" (V.7.120). Whether the nation is torn apart by destructive wars waged between ruling class families or more contemporary concerns like Brexit, those who feel the impacts greatest will be the common people—those who are more like Hubert and the Bastard than King John. In an immediate post-Brexit political moment, coupled with the global COVID-19 pandemic that ended the play's run early, Rhode's production deliberately leaves much unresolved about the relationship between "This England," English families at all levels of society, and the rest of the world.

If, in Michael Gadaleto words, by the end of Shakespeare's *King John*, England "at last arrives at a surer knowledge of what it is," the two most recent RSC productions of the play demonstrate that both the play's journey to this national self-knowledge and the destination are mutable.[73] Building on the groundwork set by Maria Aberg's gender-swapped production, Eleanor Rhode's production goes beyond the gender binary to explore how the performance of gender is as fluid as the politics or national identity of mediaeval, early modern, or contemporary England. In these productions, as in Shakespeare's era, the audience in the amphitheatre playhouse and Swan Theatre alike are meant to understand that this play is also always about *the present England*. In that the play's depiction of nationhood is a warning, a prophecy, or a parody—or all the above—these productions participate meaningfully in the self-conscious critique that theatre can offer to culture and demonstrate how aesthetics and casting sharpen the messages of even the most obscure or overlooked Shakespearean dramas.

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Notes

[1] I am most grateful for feedback on the ideas in this article from my fellow seminar participants in "Actresses Playing Shakespearean Male Characters: Exception or Significant Change?" at the 2023 Conference of the European Shakespeare Research Association, particularly the organisers, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine, Pascale Drouet, and Imke Lichterfeld. I also wish to thank Henry Aceves, Laura DeLuca, and Catherine Evans for constructive feedback on this article at various stages and the archivists and librarians at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archive for their assistance in accessing and analysing archival materials of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Travel to the Shakespeare Birthplace archive was made possible in part by a Summer Fellowship from the Northeastern Modern Language Association.

[2] In anecdotal evidence of such dismissal by theatre professionals, while I was working as a dramaturg for a professional production of *King John*, an actor asked me one day, exasperated and puzzled over the play, "What would you say this play is even *about*, anyway?" In many ways, this article is my belated, extended answer to his question.

[3] Almost all critical treatments of *King John* note the play's exclusion from the scholarly conversation and from professional stages over the centuries. Particularly illuminating are M. M. Reese's narrative of the play's life on stage and in scholarship in the seventeenth through mid-twentieth centuries. See: M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1962. Similarly, J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander's Introduction to the Arden 3rd Series has a detailed description of the play's life onstage since the early eighteenth century. See: J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, "Introduction", in J. J. M. Tobin, and Jesse M. Lander (eds.), *King John*, William Shakespeare (author), London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 1-133.

[4] Consider Prince John's weakling character in James Goldman's 1966 play *The Lion in Winter*, or how modern adaptations of the tales of Robin Hood feature a bombastic or foolish Prince John the Regent who rules England in his brother Richard's absence; Disney's portrayal in the animated 1973 *Robin Hood* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman) of Prince John as a scrawny, cowardly, thumb-sucking lion enveloped by a crown too big for his head stands out especially.

[5] In addition to the Bastard and King John, in both productions the character of Cardinal Pandulph is also played by women—in Aberg's production by Paola Dionisotti in Rhode's by Katherine Pearce. This article only addresses the roles of the Bastard and King John, leaving this fascinating pattern of female-casting for Pandulph open for further examination in future scholarship.

[6] All references to staging or performance choices such as blocking or direction from these two productions are based on personal viewing of filmed versions of the performances, or from the 2012 prompt book, when applicable. I saw Aberg's production in-person in 2012 and watched the streaming version of Rhode's production via the RSC's streaming platform. I also consulted the archived film version of Aberg's production, which is available in the RSC archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. See: *RSC/TS/2/2/2012/KJO, King John, Performance Recording (Access Copy), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2012* and Rhodri Huw (director), "Shakespeare: *King John*", William Shakespeare (writer), Tom Jackson Greaves (choreographer), Max Johns and Lizzie Powell (designers), John Frederick Wyver (producer), Rosie Sheehy and Michael Abubakar (performers), Eleanor Rhode (stage director), Stratford-upon-Avon, Royal Shakespeare Company, *Alexander Street*, 2021. **URL**. Accessed 5 May 2023.

[7] For more on the relationship between Shakespeare's play and his sources, particularly how Shakespeare moulded his play to contemporary politics, see: Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays,* New Haven, Yale UP, 2017 and J.J.M. Tobin, and Jesse M. Lander (eds.), *op. cit.*

[8] A. P. Rossiter famously describes Shakespeare's ambivalence as "two-eyed." Ambivalence, Rossiter writes, is "two opposed value-judgments [that] are subsumed" and yet are both valid, continuing, "[t]he whole is only fully experienced when both opposites are held and included in a 'two-eyed' view." See: A. P. Rossiter, *The Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures*, London, Longmans Green and Co, Second Edition, 1962, p. 51.

[9] All quotations from *The Life and Death of King John* are taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library edition; William Shakespeare, *King John,* in Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (eds.), Simon & Schuster, 2020. All references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[10] Michael Gadaleto provides both invaluable historical context for and a compelling, in-depth analysis of the ways in which *King John* participates in England's emerging nationalism. See: Michael Gadaleto, "Shakespeare's Bastard Nation: Skepticism and the English Isle in *King John*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 69, n°1, 2018, p. 3-34.

[11] Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, "Introduction: *King John* Resurgent", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John: New Perspectives*, Newark, DE, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 24.

[12] Virginia Mason Vaughan, "King John", in Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (eds.), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume II*, Malden, MA and Oxford (UK), Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 379.

[13] Brian Carroll, "The Kingly Bastard & the Bastardly King: Nation, Imagination, and Agency in Shakespeare's *King John*", *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium*, vol. 13, 2013, p. 1, emphasis original.

[14] Marsha Robinson, "The Historiographic Methodology of *King John*", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John: New Perspectives*, Newark, DE, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 35.

[15] See: Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Deborah T. Curren-Aquino notes how *King John* has major similarities to *Hamlet* in its treatment of Renaissance humanism. See: Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, *op. cit*., p. 17.

[16] A similar character is present in *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, but in Shakespeare's play Philip Faulconbridge is considerably more dynamic. Jacqueline Trace writes that "The Bastard's historical derivation ... is an enigma to Shakespearean scholars, many of whom find him to be mainly fictional, or an 'invention' based on diverse sources." Trace asserts that the Bastard Philip Faulconbridge "originat[ed] in the figure of Philip of Cognac from Holinshed's *Chronicle*, [and] developed from [Shakespeare's] acquaintance with the Henrician Faulconbridge so closely associated with the anti-papal policies of the Tudor princes" See: Jacqueline Trace, "Shakespeare's Bastard Faulconbridge: An Early Tudor Hero", *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 14, 1980, p. 60, 68.

[17] A. J. Piesse, "*King John*: changing perspectives", in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 130.

[18] As Thomas Anderson puts it, the Bastard "functions within the play as the play itself as the play functions within culture," which holds true for performances of the play at any point in history—applying to Shakespeare's culture as much as to our own. See: Thomas Anderson, "'Legitimation, Name, and All Is Gone': Bastardy and Bureaucracy in Shakespeare's '*King John*'", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, nº 2, 2004, p. 41.

[19] The "Nations at War" trilogy took place during the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival. *A Soldier in Every Son: The Rise of the Aztecs* is by Luis Mario Moncada and was translated by Gary Owen; the play is about Aztecs in Mexico in the fourteenth century. *Richard III* was directed by Roxana Silbert. See: RSC, "Maria Aberg Production 2012", Royal Shakespeare Company. **URL**. Accessed 1 February 2023.

[20] Aberg's choices were groundbreaking not just for understanding the play, but for the RSC and for women in Shakespeare adaptations, generally; Sara Reimers situates Aberg's *King John* as "the first of a number of regenderings at [the RSC] that have started to open up the canon to female performers." See: Sara Reimers, *Casting and the Construction of Gender in Contemporary Stagings of Shakespeare's Plays*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, *ProQuest*, 2017, p. 86.

[21] Maddy Costa, "RSC's *King John* casts women in major roles", *The Guardian*, 16 April 2012. **URL**. Accessed 3 March 2023.

[22] "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, The Royal Shakespeare Company, *YouTube*, 20 April 2012. **URL**. Accessed 4 March 2023.

[23] *Ibid*.; Aberg is here referring to the Shakespeare's Globe 2003 production of *Richard III*, starring Kathryn Hunter and the National Theatre's 1995 production of *Richard II*, starring Fiona Shaw.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] The Royal Shakespeare Company webpage for the play features a photo of Nixon from the play's opening that showcases her costume and shows her playing the ukulele. See: RSC, "Pippa Nixon as the Bastard in *King John*", Keith Pattison, (photographer), *Production Photos*, The Royal Shakespeare Company. **URL**. Accessed 26 August 2024.

[26] Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 85. Elsewhere, Rackin argues that "our negative estimation of women's roles in the Elizabethan history play may be, at least partly, an artefact of our own construction," since we tend to ignore the fact that women made up a significant portion of a commercial playgoing audience *and* because scholars have long paid more attention to plays that minimise women's roles, overlooking plays such as *King John*. See: Phyllis Rackin, "Women's Roles in the Elizabethan History Plays", in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 71-86.

[27] For Shakespeare's audience, the centrality of women's authority mirrors the authority of Queen Elizabeth. Furthermore, the arbitrary and mutable nature of bastardy and legitimacy is a social tension Elizabethans would be well familiar with, since the queen and her sister, Mary, were declared bastards during their father's reign. Furthermore, for Shakespeare's audience, Eleanor and Constance's powerful speeches would have been coloured by the fact that these characters were played by boys. For more on this, see: Gina Bloom, "Words Made of Breath: Gender and Vocal Agency in '*King John*'", *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 33, 2005, p. 125-155.

[28] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, 2012, p. 16. All references to specific lines or staging choices refer to the Prompt Book for this production, housed in the Royal Shakespeare Company archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[30] For more analysis of women in this production, see Jami Rogers' review of the play: Jami Rogers, "*King John* by Maria Aberg", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 31, 2013, p. 95-99.

[31] While words such as she, he, brother, sister, his, and hers all have the same number of syllables and similar stresses no matter what their gender, the differences in the aural quality of these words subtly shifting the sonic landscape of Aberg's production from Shakespeare's original. Other lines need to be more substantially changed. For example, Queen Eleanor's

line "Out on thee, rude man! Thou dost shame thy mother" (I.1.65) gets a clear feminine ending when it becomes "Out on thee, rude woman! Thou dost shame thy mother" (RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 4).

[32] During Carnival celebrations and celebratory feasts in popular early modern culture, Michael Bristol writes, "It was […] customary for communities to invite a Lord of Misrule to preside over the participatory foolishness and disorderly conduct associated with certain seasonal feasts. Popular festive misrule was a travesty of the established categories of the social order that aimed at the temporary overthrow of hierarchy, domination, and privilege." It may be that *King John* never quite recovers from the festive misrule of the wedding in Act 2, but that this scene begins the continuous overthrow of hierarchy in the world of the play. See: Michael Bristol, "Theater and Popular Culture", in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (eds.), *A New History of Early English Drama*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 234.

[33] Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion", *op. cit.*, p. 85; "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *op. cit.*

[34] Doubling emphasises how actors are continuously "playing" different parts in the ongoing performance of history, as Brett Gamboa explains. Shakespeare strategically employed doubling to enhance thematic complexity and metatheatre in his plays. In terms of historiography, doubling draws attention to the artificiality of both historical narratives and theatrical roles. See: Brett Gamboa, *Shakespeare's Double Plays: Dramatic Economy on the Early Modern Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[35] While Hubert has a slightly more coherent connection to the historical record, his presence in the play is a bit confusing. He is only named in the Folio text after the scene at Angiers, which leads some to suspect that Hubert and the 'Citizen' on the wall of Angiers are the same person. In some editions of the play and stage productions, these are the same person and in others they are not. Tobin and Lander note that Hubert "stands as a representative commoner, a servant to the crown tortured by the conflict between his conscience and his obligation to obey his sovereign" and "comes to exemplify pity" and mercy. If Hubert *is* the Citizen, he is not English, so Aberg's conflation of the characters profoundly shifts the perspective of Hubert's lines from a fully outsider's perspective to the Bastard's liminal, English one, albeit a liminality complicated by gender as well. See: J.J.M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, *op. cit.*, p. 14, p. 62.

[36] Peter Kirwan, "King John (RSC) @ The Swan Theatre", *The Bardathon*, University of Nottingham Blogs, 14 July 2012, blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2012/07/14/king-john-rsc-the-swan-theatre. Accessed 15 May 2023. The word "love" or a variation thereof appears nearly 50 times in Shakespeare's *King John*.

[37] Consider the shared lines between Richard Gloucester and Lady Anne in the wooing scene of the first act of *Richard III* or the high volume of shared lines between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Shared lines of metre create a conspiratorial atmosphere and allow actors to play around with rhythm, timing, volume, breath, and, ultimately, their audience's attention. In the early modern playhouse, where the visual aspect of theatre was not as crucial as it is for us today, aural cues were actors' most powerful tool. As Erika Lin points out, differences in the value of seating areas in the Renaissance imply that hearing the actors well was more important than visibility. See: Erika T. Lin, "Performance Practice and Theatrical Privilege:

Rethinking Weimann's Concepts of *Locus* and *Platea*", *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 22, nº 3, 2006, p. 283-298. For more on the soundscape of the early modern commercial playhouse and how actors' voices sounded, see: Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[38] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*. p. 35, emphasis mine.

[39] Peter Kirwan, *op. cit.*

[40] For the actors' approximate ages, see: "Alex Waldmann", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,* Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 10 February 2024. **URL**. Accessed 30 August 2024 and "Pippa Nixon", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,* Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 8 August 2023. **URL**. Accessed 30 August 2024.

[41] It bears noting that, while King John's son and mother are present in this play that deals so much with familial connections, the monarch's wife is curiously absent, effectively rendering the king romantically unattached.

[42] Peter Kirwan, *op. cit.*

[43] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 50, my emphasis.

[44] For more on Hubert's "marked" appearance and the connection between his appearance and his villainy, see Jeffrey R. Wilson, "Hubert de Burgh's Mark", *Stigma in Shakespeare*, Harvard College. **URL**. Accessed 20 August 2024.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 49.

[46] The Prompt Book includes the following note for the end of this scene: "KJ hug B." *Ibid*., p. 50.

[47] Arthur I, Duke of Brittany was King Henry II's grandson through his fourth son, Geoffrey II, Duke of Brittany. Geoffrey (who is dead by the time the play begins) was John's older brother, so by the rules of primogeniture that were observed in the Tudor era, Arthur is undoubtedly the rightful king. However, traditions differed slightly in the Angevin Empire, and Richard I had named his brother John as his desired heir, which resulted in the historical contentions of Shakespeare's play.

[48] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 41-44.

[49] A. J. Piesse, *op. cit.*, p. 127, emphasis original.

[50] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 56.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[52] While songs in the production prior to this moment have been mostly older or more recognizable (such as "(I've Had) The Time of My Life," made famous in the film *Dirty Dancing* or Rhianna's "We Found Love"), "Civilian," by the indie band Wye Oak, was released only a

year before the production opened. While the audience might have been able to (mentally) sign along to earlier songs, this moment seems intended for quiet contemplation. See: Wye Oak, "Civilian", *Merge Records on YouTube*, YouTube. **URL**. Accessed 3 April 2024.

[53] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[54] Particularly catching for audiences' ears are these lines from "Beggin'": "Riding high, when I was king/ I played it hard and fast, 'cause I had everything/ I walked away, but you warned me then/ But easy come, and easy go, and it would end." See: The Four Seasons, "Beggin'", Rhino Records, *YouTube.* **URL**. Accessed 3 May 2024.

[55] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[56] Willy Maley, "'And bloody England into England gone': Empire, Monarchy, and Nation in *King John*", in Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and Willy Maley (eds.), *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, Routledge, 2010, p. 49.

[57] J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[58] Michael Gadeleto, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[59] Contemporary interest in this phrase extends beyond Shakespearean productions, as evidenced by the television miniseries called *This England* from Michael Winterbottom and Kieron Quirke. However, the series' title is explicitly referencing the phrase as it appears in John of Gaunt's famous speech in *Richard II* rather than being a reference to *King John*.

[60] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[61] Imke Lichterfeld addresses similar ideas in her recent article in this journal, which discusses women in theatre and bastardy as well as gender changes in these and various other productions of *King John* throughout Europe and North America. See: Imke Lichterfeld, "Gender changes — 'the bias of the world'?", *Shakespeare en devenir*, nº 17, 2024. **URL**. Accessed 29 September 2024.

[62] "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *op. cit*., 0:53.

[63] *Ibid*., 1:08-38.

[64] The ambiguity of the eras of Aberg's and Rhode's productions contrast traditionally mediaeval productions, but also other others that reference contemporary politics more explicitly, such as Aaron Posner's 2018 *King John* at the Folger Theatre, where Brian Dykstra's King John sports an ill-fitting suit with a conspicuously long tie and leans forward across his throne in a posture instantly recognizable as a reference to the then-recently elected Donald Trump. See: Noel Sloboda, "*King John* by the Folger Theatre (review)", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 37, nº 3, 2019, p. 449-450.

[65] Andrew Dickson, "Interview: Shakespeare's 'Brexit Play': Josie Rourke on *King John*," *The Guardian*, 20 June 2016. **URL**. Accessed 23 April 2023.

[66] "*King John* In Rehearsal", *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, The Royal Shakespeare Company, *YouTube*, 25 September 2019. **URL**. Accessed 4 March 2023.

[67] In a similar move, director Aaron Posner's 2018 *King John* casts an actress as the Bastard (Kate Eastwood Norris) but the character remains male. Noel Sloboda's review notes how the actress "disappeared entirely into her part as an ambitious young man, emitting the kind of confidence and charisma befitting a descendent of the legendary Lionheart." For more on this production, see: Noel Sloboda, *op. cit.*, p. 450 and Imke Lichterfeld, *op. cit*.

[68] Gil Sutherland, "Interview: Rosie Sheehy on playing King John at the RSC", *The Stratford Herald*, 26 September 2019. **URL**. Accessed 7 March 2023.

[69] In Rhode's production, the Bastard was played by a young male actor, Michael Abubakar. Because of this casting, by surface appearances, some of the same dynamics of gender are present in Rhode's production as in Aberg's, but in Rhode's production, there is an added dissonance, since Sheehy is playing John as a man. Incidentally, John and the Bastard share fewer intimate moments in Rhode's production.

[70] Erika Lin has argued that that *King John* presents "competing notions of bodies as signifiers," writing that "[e]ven as the play teaches audience members to *disattend* the actor's body as theatrical signifier, then, it also underscores the notion that physical features *are* crucially significant." See: Erika T. Lin, "'Lord of thy presence': Bodies, Performance, and Audience Interpretation in Shakespeare's *King John*", in Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (eds.), *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 115, p. 117, my emphasis. See also: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

[71] According to Sheehy, in an interview with *The Stratford Herald*, the gown is not meant to signal womanhood at all but was modelled on the black Christian Siriano ball gown that actor Billy Porter wore to the Academy Awards in early 2019. See: Gil Sutherland, *op. cit*. For more on Porter's gown, see: Christian Allaire, "Billy Porter On Why He Wore a Gown, Not a Tux, to the Oscars", *British Vogue*, 25 Feb. 2019. **URL**. Accessed 15 August 2024.

[72] Bastard and ensemble sing the poem's final lines: "Was it for this the clay grew tall? / —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?". See: Wilfred Owen, "Futility," *Poets.org*, **URL**, lines 12-14. Accessed 29 September 2024.

[73] Michael Gadaleto, *op. cit*., p. 34.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Richard after Richard : Gender Fluid Monarch Cutting Cabbage on His/Her Own

Par Bohdan Korneliuk
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ABSTRACT

The solo performance *Richard after Richard* offers a unique interpretation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* through a post-modern lens. Lidia Danylchuk's portrayal of the protagonist transcends traditional gender roles, presenting Richard as a post-gender entity navigating a dream-like world. Through minimalist stage design and symbolic props like cabbage heads, the production explores themes of power, corruption, and humanity's relationship with nature. Danylchuk's linguistic diversity and expressive physicality add depth to the character, blurring the boundaries of time and identity. The use of repetition and semi-choreographic movement reinforces the cyclical nature of Richard's torment, emphasizing the eternal struggle between good and evil. With its post-modern approach and rich symbolism, *Richard after Richard* offers a fresh perspective on Shakespeare's classic tragedy, inviting audiences to contemplate the complexities of human nature and the consequences of unchecked ambition.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, Richard III, solo performance, post-gender, minimalist stage design, posthumanism

RÉSUMÉ

Le seul en scène *Richard after Richard* offre une interprétation unique du *Richard III* de Shakespeare au prisme d'une lentille post-moderne. L'interprétation du protagoniste par Lidia Danylchuk transcende les rôles genrés traditionnels, montrant Richard III comme une entité au-delà du genre, embarqué dans un monde fantasmé. À travers une scénographie minimaliste et des accessoires symboliques comme les choux, la mise en scène explore des thèmes tels que le pouvoir, la corruption et la relation de l'humanité avec la nature. La diversité linguistique et la corporalité expressive de Danylchuk ajoutent de la profondeur au personnage, brouillant les frontières du temps et de l'identité. L'utilisation de répétitions et de mouvements semi-chorégraphiques renforce la nature cyclique des tourments de Richard, amplifiant la lutte éternelle entre le Bien et le Mal. Par son approche post-moderne et son riche symbolisme, *Richard after Richard* offre une perspective renouvelée de cette tragédie classique shakespearienne, invitant les spectateurs à contempler les complexités de la nature humaine et les conséquences d'une ambition effrénée.

MOTS-CLÉS

Shakespeare, *Richard III*, seul en scène, au-delà du genre, scénographie minimaliste, post-humanisme

Richard after Richard
Director: Iryna Volytska
Translator/Adapter: Borys Ten
Venue: "Vie" Theatre, Khortytsia Island, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine
Actor: Lidia Danylchuk
Light designer: Yevhen Kopiov
Duration of run: 50 minutes

Premiered in 2007 and still ongoing (on tours to festivals)

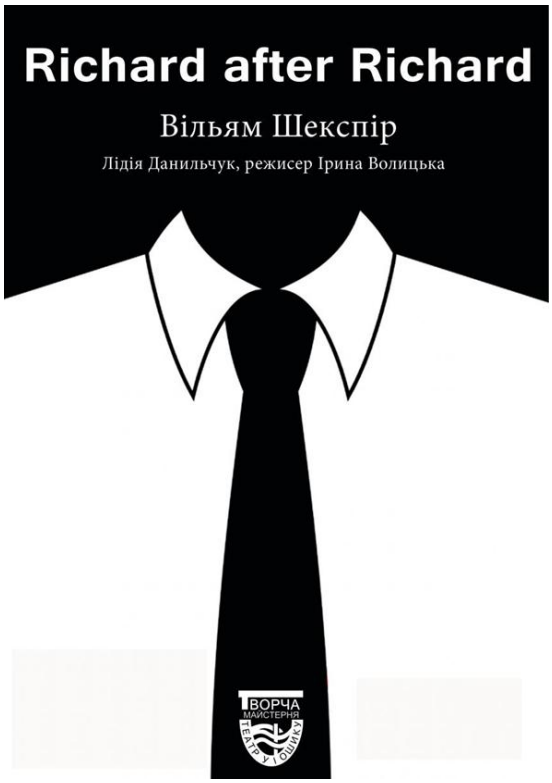
1. An encounter with reimagined Shakespeare in the flesh and on the screen

Eight years ago, on a warm September day I was about to see yet another version of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.[1] However, there were some factors that made the performance special. Firstly, my Ph.D. thesis dedicated to this play was nearly complete and I was looking forward to adding a paragraph or two to the chapter dedicated to the stage history of *Richard III* in Ukraine. Secondly, the venue chosen for this production was my absolutely favourite place in the hometown—it was presented as a part of a festival hosted in the local theatre "Vie" situated on the Khortytsia Island—the largest river island in Europe, which is a beautiful nature reserve and the historical cradle of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Thirdly, it was a solo performance, and what is even more fascinating a one-woman show. Fourthly and finally, I was genuinely intrigued by the title *Richard after Richard* speculating on what modality of "post-" this may evoke. The experience of watching Lidia Danylchuk's solo performance directed by her long-time collaborator director Iryna Volytska was pretty unforgettable, the paragraphs of my thesis were truly inspired but it was only recently that I stumbled upon the professional video recording of the production on Vimeo (**URL**).[2] Rewatching this version now was as if seeing it for the first time. In the years following my first encounter with this performance, I managed to defend my thesis, see many more Ukrainian productions of Shakespeare and find work in a higher institution located on the Khortytsia Island. All of these factors affected my perception as well as the fact that the frontline of the war with Russia is now 40 kilometres from Zaporizhzhia. So, it is high time to write more than a couple of paragraphs about this remarkable production that despite its barebones approach to stage space, costumes and text manages to retain unprecedented depth and complexity, producing favourable reaction from the audience, including those viewers who are not familiar with Shakespeare's *Richard III.*

2. Postmortem postmodernism: disembodied identity and temporal displacement

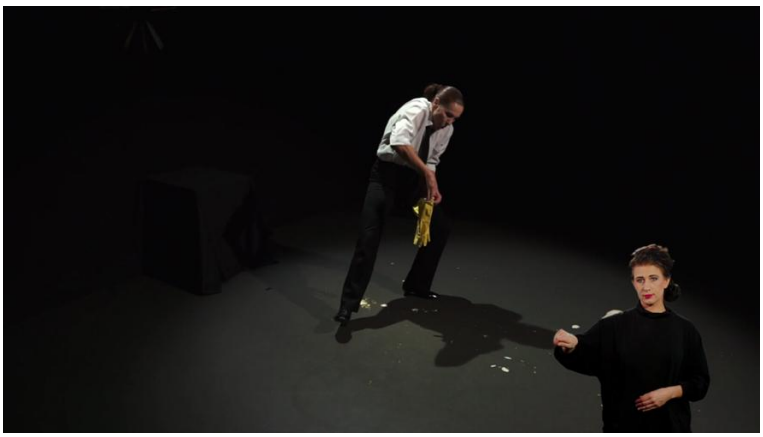
In solo performance *Richard after Richard* the protagonist is seen in the dream-like world which may be interpreted as a nightmare or (judging from the name of this production) the king's postmortem existence. Being deprived of the body Richard becomes a post-gender creature: Lidia Danylchuk who plays the role has a distinct androgynous look and uses pitch variations to sound both deep with her strong chest voice while occasionally modulating to much higher and softer sound (further we will use the gender-neutral singular pronoun "they" to refer to the character). Nothing in postmortem Richard's appearance alludes to their kingly statues—they

are not wearing a crown, instead we see the protagonist in a formal black suit and a black tie bearing no hint to the occupation or social role of their owner (black jacket and tie appear on one of the posters of the production substituting for the typical crown which has become a certain staple of theatrical posters for *Richard III*).



1. Poster of the performance.
Crédits. Advertising website *Афіша розваг Львова* (Lviv Entertainment Playbill).

The jacket has crimson lining that Richard shows to the audience right after his first act of violence. In the course of the production Danylchuk takes this jacket off with the character wearing only a white shirt and a loose tie looking more relaxed and accustomed to the role of a serial killer. As the protagonist starts to kill methodically and ruthlessly, they begin to use yellow kitchen gloves (Lidia Danylchuk draws the attention of the audience to the gloves by putting them on one after the other in a slow manner evoking associations with Michael Jackson's glove routine used when performing his hit song "*Billie Jean*" live). Latex dishwashing gloves in the ambience of the production lose their association with cleaning and housework and become a visual symbol of butchery aimed at clearing the path to the throne.



2. Richard III (Lidia Danylchuk) and the translator into sign language (Magdalena Gakh).
Crédits. Vimeo.

Richard's life after death lies in the temporal zone outside the usual earthly time—on several occasions they repeat the question "Ay, what's o'clock?" in different languages (English, Ukrainian, Polish) and to no answer. The suspended round magnet with 12 knives attached to it is constantly hanging over the protagonist—it may be seen as the clock with no hands and as a depiction of a cruel nature of time that literally kills and to which Richard himself fell victim. The postmortem time flow in the production is recognizably post-modern in its non-linear nature with frequent overlapping scenes and multiple verbal repetitions. Danylchuk's Richard speaks different languages (namely Ukrainian, English, German, Russian and Belorussian) showing their disidentification from a singular national identity. Using the original text created in the late 16th century back-to-back with modern-day translations also enables to blur the time distinctions. Thus, when freed from their bodily form Richard loses the identities anchoring them to a certain gender, nation, social strata, and time period.

3. Minimalist posthuman Richard: beyond nature and humanity

Incorporeal *Richard after Richard* incapsulates the posthuman idea of being beyond dichotomies and linearity. On a greater scale the production depicts not only postmortem but also post-apocalyptic Richard—the inhumane human contributing to the distinction of the humanity, at once relishing and suffering from the fruits of their vicious deeds. The production employs minimalist stage design endowing each prop with multiple functions and several symbolic meanings which the audience may recognize. In the very centre of the stage, one can see a little square folding table placed on the plastic mat that Richard pompously rolls out to some brisk recorded music. In the context of the performance these props become multifunctional. In the course of the production, this piece of furniture evokes different associations—at first it is used as a desk or a lectern (the latter association is strengthened with Richard's formal attire), then it becomes a drum (when the protagonist sings Shakespeare's lines and creates a galloping beat with the two knives and the table's surface), and eventually when the character starts to obsessively chop cabbages it turns into a kitchen table or if you develop the symbolic meaning of a cabbage head to its extreme—a surgical or even a butcher's table. It should be noted that preparing food in Ukraine is often thought to stereotypically belong to the traditional set of

women's responsibilities. However, Danylchuk's Richard transgresses this convention as their cabbage chopping loses all the culinary undertones rather alluding to massacre than to cookery.



3. Richard III (Lidia Danylchuk) about to start the cabbage-cutting routine and sign-language translator (Magdalena Gakh).
Crédits. Vimeo.

First time we see the protagonist in an embryo-like position embracing the black cloth covering round objects (later to be revealed as cabbage heads). After some choreographic moves that evoke associations with modern ballet dancing, Richard starts to fold the cloth turning it into a sack that they later try but fail to lift. Next, the actress starts moving in circles while dragging the sack and the audience hear the first phrase Richard utters: "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse". Later this phrase turns into a chant being reiterated in several languages. It is symbolic that the production starts with the most famous line of this Shakespearean character that appears in the penultimate scene of the final fifth act of the play. Walking in circles in ever-growing tempo accompanied by the iconic Richard's line being pronounced each time louder create the tension that is relieved when the protagonist stops the gallopade and reveals the cabbages rolling free from the black sack they had been hidden within. Pointing at the vegetables Richard says: "Nature" later repeating this word in other languages with emphatic intonation. The pointing gesture and the tone of voice show that the protagonist is jealous to the nature creations (at this stage cabbage heads still look rather fresh). The protagonist then brutally deforms these objects, relishing the very act of chopping cabbages (it is underscored by the brisk percussive soundtrack of African tribal nature and the red light that overflows the stage when the actress uses knives). Richard does not associate oneself with nature thus turning it into his adversary. Having chopped all the cabbages by the end of the production the character enters a vicious circle: the protagonist folds the mat full of cabbage chops, tries and fails to lift it, then starts to walk in circles reiterating the line "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse" in various languages. The tension rises again but this time it is not relieved as the lights fade out and the darkness absorbs Richard as their first words in the production become their last.

Among the cabbage heads used in this version three were deliberately chosen and prepared to mark the specific characters of Shakespeare's history. For instance, there is a cabbage with a stalk cut out that Lidia Danylchuk brilliantly uses in the wooing scene as a representation of Lady Anne. While saying the words from Act I Scene 2 Richard peels the leaves of the cabbage soon leaving nothing of it. Two more cabbage heads are little in size—they symbolize young princes. At first, Danylchuk gently caresses these vegetables whilst singing "Silent Night". Soon the gaze

of the actress becomes steely, and her manner of singing acquires metallic and aggressive undertones. The song goes on as the character cuts the two little cabbage heads frantically.

4. The many layers of a cabbage: cultural symbolism

Cabbage was chosen as the central object of the production and throughout the performance it unravels its rich symbolic potential. Cabbage in this version blurs the nature—culture divide being a natural object profoundly grounded in the Ukrainian customs and traditions. In Ukraine this vegetable is highly regarded as the indispensable ingredient of the two signature dishes of the local cuisine—namely, *borscht* (vegetable soup including beets, cabbage, carrots, onions, potatoes and tomatoes) and *holubtsi* (stuffed cabbage leaves). This gives the production its distinct local flair while still making it understandable for representatives of other cultures who may not decode the Ukrainian cultural connotations but will readily grasp the general symbolic meaning. The production also discovers the darker overtones of cabbage symbolism. For instance, the Ukrainians regard this vegetable as a symbol of birth and healing (according to the well-known legend new-born babies are found in cabbage; cabbage leaves are used for treating different traumas in traditional Ukrainian medicine) but in *Richard after Richard* its opposite meaning is highlighted—cutting cabbage is the act of killing and cabbage heads may well be seen as decapitated human heads. The spectators sit close enough to the stage to feel the smell of the cabbage; cabbage juice and even pieces of freshly chopped vegetables fly to the first rows involving more than just visual sense of the audience members and making the act of chopping even more reminiscent of a perverted execution. The actress demolishes organic objects with man-made tools thus creating some dramatic posthuman tension—Richard may be regarded both as a superhuman executioner who decides the fates of his sullen victims and a madman chopping vegetables when talking in iambic pentameter in different languages. When observed from the post-humanist perspective Richard's frantic chopping may be loosely seen as a visual metaphor of present-day humanity's attitude to nature or as a reflection on Ukraine's neglecting some burning environmental issues rising due to lust for profit (irresponsible industrial overproduction, extensively growing crops that reduce soil quality) comparable to Richard's lust for power. Cabbage is also a jargon word for money and wealth—Richard is corrupt, he literally steals the precious lives of his victims, he strives for the immense power and influence but ends up miserably wriggling in the huge pile of cabbage chops which is a far cry from the pile of gold but may well be seen as such in the protagonist's insane mind.

5. The eternal return: Richard III in the cycle of evil and transformation

Lidia Danylchuk is not playing a male character in this production. Her Richard is a creature with many post-characteristics: post-historical, post-Shakespearean, post-gender, post-modern. So, very true to the title of the production this is the ultimate post-Richard: like the chopped cabbage can be traced to a cabbage head, so this character is based on snippets of Shakespeare's text and its translation[3] as well as on elements of classic productions remodelled and reshaped for the solo performance; the director and actress take these elements and combine them in an artistic mix that appeals even to those who know little about the original. In this version, senses and messages are greatly reinforced through repetition of sentences and

circumstances, reiteration paired with semi-choreographic movement, music themes and changes of light. On the other hand, one can treat the title as a sentence with ellipsis at the end alluding to the perennial nature of evil that Richard brings and the never-ending cycle of torment that the character is doomed for. The geometric dominant of this production is sphere and circle. The circular sun (with knives that remind of its rays) is hanging over the protagonist, Richard often goes in circles, and the shape of cabbage heads is spherical. The composition of the show is recursive: words and phrases are often repeated, the same act of symbolic murder through chopping cabbage happens again and again, the first and the final scenes of the production are almost identical. Richard is trapped and there is no way out of this vicious circle: as lights fade out the exhausted character falls into oblivion. But Richard will wake up again with sharp knives and a sack full of cabbages, wearing a black suit and a tie for another 50 minutes of stage time whenever you buy a ticket to Lidia Danylchuk's performance or hit the play button to watch the video version.

Notes

[1] I originally saw the production on September 28, 2019.

[2] Also available on YouTube.

[3] The production employs the Ukrainian translation of the play produced by the famous Ukrainian poet and translator Borys Ten in 1952.

Bohdan Korneliuk

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Gender Changes and the Weak-Queen Dilemma

Par Imke Lichterfeld
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ABSTRACT

In 1973, Michael Manheim published *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean History Play*, analysing flawed, indecisive, and unsteady kings whose status as courageous warlords is dismissed and their reign doomed as these attributes would rather be applied to women. Gender binaries and preconceived configurations have often been called into question but the spectrum between feminine and masculine has lately become the focus of attention.

Female actors today raise their voice to claim parts formerly restricted to male colleagues due to the character's binary gender. Disrupting conservative casting concepts against sexist preconceptions raises awareness towards power structures in the acting business. Transformations of traditional casting allow for fascinating staging opportunities. Directed by Deborah Warner, Fiona Shaw played Richard II in 1995 at the National Theatre. In 2016, Gillian Bevan portrayed King Cymbeline in their RSC production (Dir. Melly Still). In 2017, Betsy Schwartz was Henry VI in an all-female adaptation called *Bring Down the House* by the Seattle Shakespeare Company (Dir. Rosa Joshi). However, Richard II has been labelled "effeminate", Cymbeline as "unreasonable", and Henry VI as "milquetoast". This reading would not speak of female empowerment.

The theatre is a cultural construct, a configuration of contemporary society. Strong male characters have been cast with women. Additionally, production dynamics depend on ensemble interaction. Yet, the above castings seem to perpetuate the stereotype of a petulant, feeble, and emotional woman whose regiment must fail. Patriarchal power relations can then be traced in today's Shakespearean castings. This seems a twisted discourse of enablement. This contribution adds to the discourse on equality in contemporary performance industries concerning female weak kings/monarchs in Shakespeare and question its function.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, female casting, weak king, Henry VI, Richard II, Cymbeline

RÉSUMÉ

En 1973, Michael Manheim a publié *The Weak King Dilemna in the Shakespearean History Play* (Le dilemme du roi faible dans les pièces historiques de Shakespeare, non traduit) analysant les rois défaillants, indécis et instables, dont le statut de guerrier courageux est rejeté et leur règne condamné, étant donné que ces défauts seraient plutôt attribués à des femmes. On a souvent remis en cause la binarité du genre et les configurations préconçues, mais la variété entre le féminin et le masculin est récemment devenue un centre de préoccupation.

À présent, des actrices font entendre leur voix pour réclamer des rôles qui étaient autrefois réservés aux acteurs étant donné le genre binaire du personnage. Déranger les concepts traditionnels de distribution des rôles en s'opposant aux préconceptions sexistes met l'accent sur les leviers de pouvoir dans le milieu théâtral. Transformer les distributions traditionnelles permet de fascinantes possibilités scéniques. Sous la direction de Deborah Werner, Fiona Shaw a interprété Richard II en 1995 à Londres, au National Theatre. En 2016, Gillian Bevan a représenté Cymbeline à la RSC dans une mise en scène de Melly Still. En 2017, Betsy Schwartz a endossé le rôle de Henry VI dans une adaptation uniquement féminine intitulée *Bring Down the*

House par la Seattle Shakespeare Company, mise en scène par Rosa Joshi. Cependant, Richard II a été accusé d'être « efféminé », Cymbeline d'être « déraisonnable » et Henry VI d'être « timoré ». Cette lecture ne ferait pas la part belle à l'émancipation féminine.

L'art théâtral est une construction culturelle, une configuration de la société contemporaine. De puissants personnages masculins ont été interprétés par des actrices. De plus, la dynamique d'un spectacle dépend de l'interaction entre tous les interprètes. Cependant, les distributions ci-dessus semblent perpétuer le stéréotype de la femme irritable, faible et émotive, dont l'armée doit être battue. Les distributions shakespeariennes actuelles peuvent révéler des liens de pouvoir patriarcal. Cela semble un discours biaisé concernant les capacités réelles. Cet article s'inscrit dans la trajectoire de l'égalité dans la distribution des spectacles contemporains en ce qui concerne les faibles rois shakespeariens interprétés par des actrices, et en questionne le fonctionnement.

MOTS-CLÉS

Shakespeare, distribution féminine, roi faible, Henry VI, Richard II, Cymbeline

Gender binaries and preconceived gender constellations have often been called into question on the contemporary stage. Female actors have claimed parts formerly restricted to male colleagues and this contributes to the rethinking of a role's binary gender. Even the spectrum between feminine and masculine has lately become the focus of attention. Against conservativism and heteronormative, sexist preconceptions, disruptive and innovative casting concepts raise awareness towards power structures on stage but also in the acting business. Additionally, adaptation dynamics depend on ensemble interaction; the contextualisation of e.g. a female actor in a male role affects everyone involved in a production. The theatre is a cultural construct, a configuration of contemporary society. Strong male characters have now been cast with women and transformations deviating from traditional casting allow for fascinating staging opportunities.

This might sound like an old hat and possibly an albeit politically difficult but straightforward process. A question that remains is what kind of aspects and specific attitudes are highlighted in a role when cast with a person of another gender. What happens if Shakespearean kings are played by female actors? Directed by Deborah Warner, Fiona Shaw played Richard II in 1995 at the National Theatre.[1] In 2016, Gillian Bevan portrayed King Cymbeline in an RSC production (Dir. Melly Still),[2] and in 2017, Betsy Schwartz was Henry VI in an all-female adaptation called *Bring Down the House* by the Seattle Shakespeare Company (Dir. Rosa Joshi).[3] This article would like to highlight some issues that arise with these specific three kings' castings because one aspect that unites these royal characters is their weakness. Richard II, Henry VI, and Cymbeline are no successful and strong monarchs, and they are punished for their lack of real political Machiavellian power.[4]

In 1969, Michael Manheim published "The Weak King History Play of the Early 1590's" in the journal *Renaissance Drama*, followed by the monograph *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean History Play* in 1973, analysing flawed, indecisive, and unsteady kings like Richard II, Henry VI, and King John, whose status as courageous warlords can be doubted. Manheim asserts that such plays "involve dilemmas about the crown which reflect the public anxiety […], and further that these dilemmas are integral to the construction of these plays".[5] They address "kings who are inconsistent and generally disappointing".[6] Such attributes of weakness were—in the past—rather applied to women,[7] as the Duke of York shouts at the belligerent Queen of *Henry VI*: "Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible".[8] How are the above-mentioned royal characters affected by female casting choices?

All three kings are deemed inadequate: Richard II is been labelled "frivolous, whimsical […], most unsympathetic",[9] and "most contemptible",[10] Cymbeline—whom Manheim does not investigate as the nature of the play does not categorise it as a history play but a romance, or tragicomedy—as unreasonably "harsh"[11] and who irritatingly "chides"[12] his daughter, and, thirdly, Henry VI has been called "immature", "unfit to govern",[13] and "craven".[14] Casting such roles with female actors might not speak of female empowerment. It could be claimed to perpetuate the stereotype of a petulant, feeble, and emotional woman whose regiment must fail. Patriarchal power relations could then be traced in such castings which appears to represent a twisted discourse of enablement.

This article contributes to the discourse on equality in the contemporary performance industries concerning the apparent female casting of weak kings in Shakespeare and questioning its function. This indicates whether the image of a female actor as an 'endorsed' weak king questions gender stereotypes at all. As such, Manheim's ideas of weak kingship need to be re-addressed and evaluated on a different level: this concerns the current function of the depicted

weak monarch and a focus on female weak kings in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry VI*, "dealing with the reigns of kings so weak that they ultimately lost their thrones or perished",[15] and briefly *Cymbeline*. Manheim argues on Richard II, Henry VI, and—a further example of his—King John: "As 'mirrors' of Elizabethan policy, they seemed inconsistent and contradictory".[16] It is the ambivalence surrounding hegemonic masculinity that this article deals with. It includes the contrasting effects that the plays offer as far as opposing strength is concerned.

What is weak kingship then? How can it be defined? If the cardinal virtues[17] are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, is weakness imprudence, injustice, cowardice, excess? How is it represented in the plays? Is it effeminate? How is an individual weak king presented? What are the consequences of weak rule? If leadership is questioned, what happens to the power vacuum that exists in place of "strong" rule? How is it filled? The targeted dramas clearly depict "weak" monarchs, and Henry VI admits: "I know not what to say; my title's weak" (*3 Henry VI*, I.1.134) and Richard II questions his role as king: "Am I not king?" (III.2.83).[18] They are incompetent, ineffective, and as rulers, they fail.

Manheim explains that the plays are, to a certain extent, a representation of an early modern contemporary crisis, or rather, that they reflect the fears of an English society at the end of the 16th century. Today, it seems that insecurities around the turn of a century four hundred years later might address weak kingship just as much. The political effect of the plays regarding power is just as current as it might have ever been. What, however, has that do to with women? Traditionally, women have often been labelled as non-working as they "only" took care of domestic chores and child-raising? Why should female attributes confirm weakness in a monarch? Would not the choice itself present an advancement?

Casting choices are vital in the creation of a performance: if, in Shakespeare's time, casting meant white English, male and able-bodied actors, what does this say about current body norms—fit, cisgender? If these standards, as traditionally thought, of legitimate casting of a Shakespearean character remained, then non-white, to phrase this in a binary manner, disabled, or female actors experience the often-invoked "glass ceiling" of casting discrimination. However, "familiarity and novelty"[19] are what stage adaptations are all about and they always include and emphasise the visual. Spectators watch actors, and they observe the stage as well as the interaction of characters. Taking the willing suspension of disbelief into account, an audience yet sees whether male actors play female roles as well as the body of actors, colour, age, or apparent impairments—which can have different, including positive, effects. The transformation of a character that occurs when it is played by different actors with diverse backgrounds and different physical bodies—due to their (trans-)gender, race, age, class, or disability—allows to explore and change perspective. This is exciting as an audience can experience other aspects of plays. Such an awareness guides "the appeal of adaptations for audiences [which] lies in their mixture of repetition and difference".[20]

Casting female actors in male roles is not only important as female roles are extremely limited with regard to Shakespeare, but it is just as noteworthy when the size of roles is concerned, as Shakespeare does not offer many major female parts. This remark does not signify that the importance of a part is solely dependent on the number of lines, but this aspect does figure in the discussion. Clare McManus argues that "Shakespearean performance is an arena for exploring desire, sexuality and gender roles and for challenging audience expectations, especially when it comes to the female performer".[21] This also raises questions as to whether female casting in male roles breaks with conventions of a role's heteronormativity, and in how far the female actors portray a supposed masculinity. Would that character be more feminine

automatically, or even effeminate, i.e. characterised as more female or feminine and therefore less appropriate for maleness or masculinity? In her article in this volume, Sara Reimers argues for the different opportunities that genderfluid casting present as far as character interpretation and different adaptations are concerned. The female actor Fiona Shaw described playing the male Richard II as a chance to measure herself against some of the greatest poetry in drama, but not against men: "The pleasure of being allowed to speak these wonderfully empowering speeches is something many female actors never get near".[22] It appertains to acting companies to experiment, diversify, and promote the female "Other". Casting thus is a political issue—especially in political plays about power like *Richard II* and *Henry VI*, but also in romances like *Cymbeline*.

1. *Richard II*

Shakespeare's King Richard II, Manheim evaluates, is "whimsical"[23] and yet characterised by a "sudden shift in appeal to audience sympathies",[24] as Richard first self-fashions as an absolutist monarch but fails to rule well; when he is toppled, he becomes pitiable and 'effeminate'. Bolam maintains that "Shakespeare's play introduces us to a king who indulges primarily in the luxury of eloquent words".[25] Richard is imprudent—he does not "care" for his country's well-being (he confiscates his uncle's lands though these—by primogeniture—belong to his cousin), he is unjust (judging wrongfully against this same loyal cousin due to his—Richard's—own involvement in the murder of another uncle), he is a coward (who despairs without an army), and he is intemperate (taking decisions on a whim).[26] The king has never acted dutifully or with true responsibility. Other critics call him "hysterical",[27] an adjective often reserved for women due to its connection to the spleen, "callously self-absorbed",[28] and an unfit, or "suffering misfitted king",[29] an "incompetent and corrupt ruler".[30] This is something that seems to condense most scholars' arguments is his lack of inherited duty: "royal transgressions, abuse of power and overuse of political privileges brought the idea of [this] king's divinity into question".[31] Richard II stylises himself as God's anointed substitute (I.2.37) on earth, the definition of medieval kingship: he was indeed born to fulfil this position and might be pitied in his failures. However, he is "very human"[32] an ineffective sovereign and unsuccessful ruler. He is not a Machiavellian; his whims and his vulnerability do not speak of such strength. His arbitrary commands and eccentric behaviour actually create a power vacuum which threatens his realm and the dynasty, not only financially.[33] The alarming aspect of *Richard II* is that the king so quickly and unexpectedly appears to shed his born dominance. Not seeming to know any better, he thus consciously allows the power vacuum to appear.

This vacuum is filled by different individuals: the older generation supplants his beautiful poetics with their own: Richard's uncles York and Gaunt, as well as the Bishop of Carlisle excel as well at impressive speeches. Both cry over the loss of England's peace: Gaunt against Richard who proves an ineffective ruler—England being "leased out […] / Like to a tenement to a pelting farm" (II.1.59-60)—, Carlisle for Richard, if his divinely anointed kingship is supplanted: "let me prophecy / The blood of English shall manure the ground" (IV.1.137-138).

Real physical power is wielded by the fighter and masculine persona Henry Bolingbroke. "Shakespeare's *Richard II* features competing versions of masculinity […]. In contrast to Bolingbroke, whose manhood is based on stoical restraint of his passions and verbal reticence, Richard is prone to displays of affect, rhetorical excess, and theatricality."[34] Bolingbroke easily fills the void. Threatened by the factual, military power of Bolingbroke, Richard seems entirely willing to offer his possessions to his rival cousin. Manheim labels the later usurper Bolingbroke

"strong, shrewd, and competent"[35] and "strong, silent, competent, blackhearted, brutal".[36] He slowly but surely takes over leadership in the country and then the crown itself; it is a forceful but—until Richard's own lamentations—quiet revolution which only erupts when Richard himself excels at undutiful action, greedy decision-making, mocking spitefulness, and disrespect towards his subjects. Bolingbroke's charge hails a change of politics with a different kind of politically motivated patriotism, in which leadership is constructed very differently from the way it was under Richard. Manheim reminds his readers of the premise that Machiavellian behaviour is successful: Bolingbroke accepts the practical challenge and decides to seize the opportunity directly. He introduces a factual, "believable, consistent"[37] treatment of royalty and power. Facing the changed political situation that comes with Bolingbroke's rise to power, Richard fails to recognise the dissolution of his absolutist understanding of kingship. He seems deluded, reacts irrationally. Manheim underlines that he gains in the audience's favour only when he seems alienated by society but supported by his wife: "the queen acts as a catalyst whereby our sympathies towards Richard change"[38] This highlights that sympathy, and strength can be compared but also contrasted.

Richard—whose identity "includes a dimension of femininity"[39]—is often played by lean actors, sometimes long-haired and fair, as David Tennant in 2013 whose costumes underlined associations with Christ, or "beautiful" and thin Ben Wishaw in 2012. In 1995, however, Fiona Shaw played Richard II at the National Theatre. This casting was an utter novelty and experimental; Shaw sported cropped hair and wide floating clothes matching those of the king's cousin Bolingbroke with whom this Richard was portrayed as being very close. The production was criticised for casting Shaw in the role. This seemed crossing other boundaries than a female Hamlet, possibly setting new—and more fluid—standards for the interpretation of history. The criticism is questionable and there was a debate on various levels: The *New York Times* considered Shaw's Richard a "clowning, spoiled brat" [40] while Claire Heuchan calls Shaw "pitch-perfect: imperious, commanding".[41] Other critics held further contrasting views, calling her a "man-child" but also "fully female".[42] She encapsulates and demands pity, too: "And after Richard's downfall, there is a rawness to her performance that makes it impossible to look away from this tragedy. […] her Richard has a vulnerability"[43] which indeed was intended by the director Deborah Warner[44] to confront stereotypes. One question that remains is whether it is stereotypically feminine to be vulnerable. Carol Rutter stresses that this shows an "androgynous rather than effeminate"[45] and childish[46] side of Richard; she also mentions the adjectives emotional and skittish[47] but also that this performance questioned the nature of kingship, i. e. politics, and, I might add, hegemonic masculinity.

It does not become quite clear how much this Richard might be at least non-binary, if not genderless. Klett's verdict announces that "Shaw's performance revealed both the performativity of gender and the instability of masculinity"[48] via alienation. Audiences might revere or ponder the extravagant subversiveness of casting the lean female actor Fiona Shaw as the protagonist of *Richard II* which seems to epitomise the weak king dilemma. The power structure in the play is certainly gendered—masculine, physical and conservative, possibly toxic. However, Shaw's performance demonstrates that female casting does empower the female actor via her/their ambiguity.[49]

2. *Henry VI*

The three plays of *Henry VI* present a king who yields his political power due to others' courageous and offensive moves. Just like Richard II, Henry is, at least at the beginning of his

reign, a young and inexperienced king, and thus more or less impotent. He is also "patient and compassionate",[50] and as such imprudent. "He loves and trusts his fellow men, and in return he is deceived, abused, deposed, murdered".[51] Indeed, his weakness is his lack of courage: he does not show signs of fortitude, yet he cannot be blamed for lacking neither justice nor temperance. In fact, he could be labelled a good Christian king[52]—"Henry's so-called inadequacies are in fact his desire for honesty, justice, and peace"[53]—but as he lacks the spirited boldness of his adversaries, that is the cause of his downfall, as the opposing nobility acts according to a "crude but exclusive acceptance of deceit and violence".[54] Henry cannot appease the self-righteous jingoism of the Yorkist faction that challenges his title nor can he calm down his extremely strong wife.

Manheim claims that "*Henry VI* present a dilemma. As Henry's weakness brings his kingdom to ruin, we long for a king with the presence of a Henry V".[55] Instead, Henry VI reigns in the shadow of his glorified father. Praiseworthy and charitable, soul-afflicted from the ongoing discord (III.1.107) in his nation "virtuous Henry" (*1H6,* III.1.76)[56] strives to reconcile "civil dissension" (*1H6*, III.1.72) but meets a wall of harshness and corruption that silence this "conscientious,"[57] innocent and peace-loving, "well-intentioned",[58] considerate, and "determinedly passive"[59] king. Henry is not a vociferous king, but naïve and peace-loving;[60] he does not exclaim his virtues but remains considerate and silent, often "unseen",[61] if passionate about his future wife.[62] In this play, "it seems agreed by the contending nobility, one must be patient, alert, swift in action, courageous, physically strong, and ruthless".[63] Especially these latter expectations refer to a powerful masculinity. Henry lacks this and thereby, like Richard II, causes a power vacuum. This is seized by two different figures. The one is the cause for Henry's downfall: Richard of York, "not in the least effeminate",[64] presents an image of masculine bravado—he is impatient, physically strong, and self-confident, "certainly a glamourous figure".[65]

However, the king's faction is not devoid of courage: the belligerent and vindicative Queen Margaret is Henry's best sword and shield and thrives in Henry's absence: "The Queen hath best success when you are absent" (*3H6*, II.2.74). She acts as a ruthless, Machiavellian strategist of calculated efficiency and proves a headstrong woman in a patriarchal regime. Howard and Rackin term her a sexualised and ambitious figure who creates "gender disorder"[66] and disrupts the court. Margaret does not just play the role of a diplomatic, female pawn.[67] Manheim argues that the Queen is vital in the audience's shift of sympathy towards the weak monarch and thus against the Yorkist faction.[68] Yet, her strength in turn balances Henry as the weak, "unmanly"[69] party even further.[70]

In this play, gender binaries are clearly called into question: the spectrum between feminine and masculine becomes one focus of attention. When reminiscing about his inability to recognise Gloucester's well-meaning support, Henry implicitly even compares his fortune to a cow unable to save its calf from slaughter, i.e. he uses a metaphor of a mother figure for himself (*cf*. *2 Henry VI*, III.1. 210-212).[71] On a different level, this discussion evolves around the more contemporary question of why an effeminate king is interpreted as a weak king. To address this in a binary manner, why should a man not be allowed to be soft and endearing with benign attention towards complicated and often violent country politics? Why should he not practice religious principles as a God-anointed medieval king?

In performances, this king too, is often thin or boyish, be he played by Chuck Iwuji (RSC), Tom Sturridge (The Hollow Crown) or recently Mark Quartley (RSC). In 2017, Betsy Schwartz impersonated Henry VI in an all-female adaptation called *Bring Down the House* by the Seattle

Shakespeare Company (Dir. Rosa Joshi).[72] The Company divided the three plays into an agile two-part production called "Part 1: Throne of Treachery" and "Part 2: Crusade of Chaos". In contrast to the blond and aggressively styled Mari Nelson as York, Betsy Schwartz, dressed in a lean robe, truly looks like a weak and meek king Henry: "The manly battlefield posturing sometimes becomes overkill, […] Mari Nelson's resentful, scheming York has a dominating presence that contrasts nicely with Betsy Schwartz's quivering piety as King Henry".[73]



1. Betsy Schwartz as Henry VI, *Bring Down the House*,
Seattle (Seattle Shakespeare Company & upstart crow collective) 2017,
dir. Rosa Joshi.
Crédits. John Ulman.

Interestingly, some critics would not see the performance as feminine, as Fiona Shaw' s had been debated about: "Henry's weakness does not—thankfully—get played as 'feminine,' which it easily could in a production less conscious of its choices about gender and power dynamics."[74] This is an interesting observation, notwithstanding the fact that Seattle did put on an all-female production and clearly elaborates the characters' individualities in their performance.

I have just argued that Henry is seen as effeminate. What is the difference between effeminate and feminine? The latter "relating to women or girls; female", the former adding the derogatory matter of "having characteristics and ways of behaving traditionally associated with women and regarded as inappropriate for a man" (*OED*). Therefore, both the effeminate and feminine suffer in a construct of hegemonic masculinity. In the 20th century, this might moot seem empowering. In the context of an all-female production like this however, with a strong female Richard of York, it can add differentiation within equality.

Seattle Shakespeare Company presented their *Henry VI* adaptation as a fragile game of thrones but paying attention to parental responsibilities. Betsy Schwartz's interpretation of Henry VI in this all-female production highlights aspects of contrasts within the gender spectrum; while she appears considerate, the other women play on the opportunity to be ruthless, brutal, and treacherous. The performance indeed opened the angle of women bringing down a patriarchal house.

3. *Cymbeline*

Cymbeline was written almost twenty years later than most of Shakespeare's histories, around 1610. It is not considered an English historical play but a romance, tragicomedy, or even fairy tale, yet it draws on English historical myths. As a romantic comedy, *Cymbeline* presents a very different genre than the two plays dealt with above. King Cymbeline is a mythical king of the English past. Here, different, and not exclusively political, complications arise as the courtier Posthumous and his love, King Cymbeline's daughter Imogen are separated: Posthumous is banished from Cymbeline's court, which is infiltrated by the evil stepmother Queen. *Cymbeline* is a "classic fairy tale filled with wicked stepmothers, beautiful princesses, buffoonish clowns, a minor war and divine interventions".[75] Similarly, Anne Barton confirms that the "material [of the romances] is the archetypal stuff of legend and fairy-tale".[76] The set-up is thus very different; however, here, too, the play presents the audience with a weak king. Cymbeline proves weak for other reasons that might yet be compared to Richard and Henry: he is influenced by a selfish advisor (his Queen), he takes risky and unwise political decisions (Cymbeline denies Rome its tithes) and thereby proves imprudent and unjust. Even Alexander Leggat, while concentrating on political drama, mentions that the play is full of "questions of authority and obedience".[77]

Cymbeline, too, is intemperate[78] and unwise; the play depicts "conditions in which [the] effects [of absolute rule] become pernicious".[79] He does not grasp the effect of his seemingly "witless"[80] decisions against his daughter, her husband, and also in his relationship with Rome. Only after a martial confrontation with Rome will he come to his "paradox" [81] senses: "it was folly in me"[82] and all the play's complications will be resolved, and the dispersed royal family is able to reunite.

Cymbeline might appear less as a weak and more like a foolish king; as such, he presents himself as a weak monarch. Cymbeline could not necessarily be labelled effeminate. In contrast to the other two historical kings dealt with here, he is more of a harsh king with tyrannical aspects, not meek but unreasonable. Manheim's thoughts on "myriad struggles with flesh and spirit" could be applied to Cymbeline.[83]

One factor Cymbeline does not control but bears out is his apparently egoistic second wife, the selfish and bothersome queen who seems to dominate him. In fact, Jordan claims that "[her] power is unauthorized […], in effect she governs Britain".[84] In *Cymbeline*, most of *Man*kind seems fickle, unjust, intemperate, and this allows the wife and demands the daughter of the king to show her mettle. As shocking as Cymbeline's display of lack of trust and hope is, this opens fairy tale opportunities: the daughter proves a loyal, faithful, and clever woman. She will overcome the stereotypical feminine fearfulness in the face of intrigue. She will prove alert and intelligent unlike her father (and unlike Richard and Henry). The end of the tragicomic, romantic play arrives when confusion is resolved, and true reconciliation reached. Shakespeare seems to revisit different possibilities to sound the waters of gender representation.

In 2016, directed by Melly Still, Gillian Bevan portrayed King Cymbeline.[85] This king was not strong and played by an older woman actor who, as King/Queen, behaved in a very childish manner. This demanded a reading that not only questioned the wisdom of the female monarch but also highlighted the further aspect that foolishness might come with age. Gillian Bevan strode wildly about the stage not knowing how to keep her realm appeased as well as her demeanour calm and determined. This could be interpreted as leaving some interpretative opportunities untouched and instead performing this monarch as presenting an uncontrolled

femininity—though admittedly, some spectators saw a motherly warmth in Bevan's portrayal. Unfortunately, the character of the play's queen was additionally portrayed as a scheming husband who strives to dominate his wife in a typical mid-20th century patriarchal manner that seemed artificial and outdated. The casting ostracised, not only the audience but also the dynamics of the characters. Some reviews were positive, though: the defamiliarisation of the weak king as a woman "adds a certain nuance to the role, […] with verve and wit […] harsh-but-with-heart rather marvellously"[86] and "lends Cymbeline unusual depth by suggesting that chauvinist defiance can be combined with maternal anguish".[87] This caring reading adds layers to the role that can be compared to the idea of a dutiful, mild monarch. As such this layer adds a new reading for King Cymbeline as the benign motherly type—who also later succumbs to Augustan Rome whom she had beaten in battle. This can be interpreted as a last shout to respect such kind of care from a matriarch. It could also be interpreted as worthy and dignified. At the same time, it furthers the comparison with the dramatization of the historical monarchs. Personally, I find this frustrating and not empowering at all as it re-invokes a paternalistic stereotype and thereby confirms it.

Conclusion

If the theatre is a cultural construct that reflects contemporary society, Shakespeare certainly demands evaluations of the role of the monarch and weak kingship. It is a stereotype that appears continually in his plays and that he reconfigures throughout his career. Should we talk about an early modern patriarchal toxic model of masculinity? Does sovereignty—"in theory the final source of law"[88]—have to be masculine and strong? The representation of power is certainly less clear, and a gender discourse is taking place when gender swaps on stage are undertaken.

Via casting concepts, the audience has to question the emergence of a different gendered power structure. Weak monarchs allow for plot complications; a king's flawed decision-making opens opportunities for other characters to shine. Adaptations of Shakespeare where women portray these week male parts question power structures, including those affecting their own gender. It also has to be taken into account that Shakespeare allows to evoke the transformation or shift of sympathy to and from those that are considered weak characters; this might even include redeeming aspects of a feminine quality in a monarch. This again might enable changes of perspective as far as compassion with the visually displayed choices are concerned.

If weak kings are played by female actors, there certainly is a significant change in the power dynamics on stage. A recurrence of an early modern configuration of gendered power relation might then be detected in contemporary art. This would not speak of female empowerment. These castings might perpetuate the stereotype of a petulant, feeble, and emotional woman whose regiment must fail. And yet it also allows women in the position of power and to be destructively but also constructively criticised. Such transformations hold a more contemporary mirror up to nature. These more recent shifts in power configurations can then be addressed, confronted, and consciously reflected.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

« I know the disciplines of war » (*Henry V*, III.2.141) : faire « théâtre » des traités militaires ?

Par John Delsinne
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RÉSUMÉ

Dans *Henry V* (1599), Shakespeare pourrait bien vouloir se mettre en scène dans ce capitaine exemplaire qu'est Fluellen, mise en abyme qui pourrait alors révéler combien il tire lui-même profit des préceptes édictés par divers traités écrits sur les « disciplines de la guerre ». Or, dans *Lawes and Ordinances* (1586), Robert Dudley, comte de Leicester et général de l'armée d'Élisabeth I^re^, recense les règles que son corps militaire est tenu d'observer pour triompher des forces de Philippe II d'Espagne. De même, dans *Lawes and Orders of Warre Established for the Good Conduct of the Service in Ireland* (c. 1599), Robert Devereux, parti en Irlande le 27 mars 1599 afin d'y combattre la rébellion menée par Tyrone, publie lui-aussi les règles auxquelles son armée doit se conformer strictement, sous peine de châtiments. Par-delà une parenté patente entre la pièce de théâtre et les manuels militaires qui circulaient à l'époque élisabéthaine, il semble que Shakespeare ait largement emprunté aux traités de son temps et se montre manifestement très bien informé sur les disciplines et la pratique de la guerre consignées par les généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^ comme par tant d'autres théoriciens. Le dramaturge s'ingénie par ailleurs à mettre en scène les conséquences de l'indiscipline militaire sous la forme de soldats insubordonnés chargés d'illustrer la rupture avec les « disciplines de la guerre » si chères à Fluellen comme à Dudley et à Essex. Non content de réserver à ce dernier un triomphe imaginaire dans le Chœur de l'Acte V, l'assimilant à rien de moins qu'au « victorieux César » embrochant la « rébellion de son épée », *Henry V* rend en particulier visible sur la scène de son théâtre nombre de références précises venant du propre manuel militaire d'Essex. Pourrait-on voir ainsi la pièce comme une œuvre hagiographique, sinon idéologique, où se dessinerait une possible prise de position politique de la part de Shakespeare en faveur d'Essex ? Faire théâtre de son traité militaire ajouterait-il à l'enthousiasme idéologique latent accompagnant l'attente de son retour triomphal ? La pièce *Henry V*, en plus de son fonctionnement d'œuvre maniériste reposant sur des jeux d'emprunts détournés, pourrait donc aussi en partie se lire comme un traité militaire retranscrit sous forme dramatique.

MOTS-CLÉS

Shakespeare, pièces historiques, *Henry V*, traités militaires, art de la guerre, maniérisme, Robert Devereux, comte d'Essex, Robert Dudley, comte de Leicester, Nicolas Machiavel, idéologie

ABSTRACT

In *Henry V* (1599), Shakespeare may well wish to portray himself as the exemplary Captain Fluellen, a mise en abyme that could reveal how much he himself benefited from the precepts laid down in various treatises regarding the "disciplines of war". In his *Lawes and Ordinances* (1586), Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and General of Elizabeth I's army, listed the rules that his military corps had to obey in order to triumph over the forces of Philip II of Spain. Similarly, in his *Lawes and Orders of Warre Established for the Good Conduct of the Service in Ireland* (c. 1599), Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, who left for Ireland on March 27^th^, 1599, to fight the rebellion led by Tyrone, also published the rules with which his army must strictly comply, under pain of punishment. Besides the manifest kinship between the play and the military manuals circulating in the Elizabethan period, Shakespeare seems to have heavily borrowed from the treatises of his time and is demonstrably very well informed about the "disciplines" and practice of war recorded by these generals of Elizabeth I and many other theorists. The playwright also

ingeniously stages the consequences of military indiscipline in the guise of insubordinate soldiers to illustrate the departure from the “disciplines of war” so dear to Fluellen, Dudley and Essex. In addition to providing the latter with an imaginary triumph in the Chorus of Act V, likening him to nothing less than the “victorious Caesar” broaching the “rebellion on his sword”, *Henry V* makes a number of specific references from Essex’s military manual visible on the theatrical stage. Should the play thus be seen as a work of hagiography, not to say ideology, reflecting Shakespeare’s possible political stance in favour of Essex? Would dramatising his military treatise add to the latent ideological enthusiasm with which his triumphal return was anticipated? While *Henry V* functions as a mannerist work based on an interplay of misappropriated borrowings, it could therefore also be read in part as a military treatise cast in dramatic form.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, history plays, *Henry V*, military treatises, art of war, mannerism, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Niccolò Machiavelli, ideology

Dans les marges du champ de bataille d'Azincourt, tel que Shakespeare en offre une représentation très fidèle, inféodé qu'il est aux *Chroniques* de Raphael Holinshed[1] pour écrire *Henry V*[2] (1599), Fluellen déclare d'un ton volontiers pompeux qu'il a lu les récits des chroniqueurs, « as I have read in the chronicles » (IV.7.90-91), sur les glorieuses et légendaires batailles de l'histoire nationale de l'Angleterre médiévale et se targue, en outre, de connaître rien de moins que les traités militaires sur les « disciplines de la guerre[3] » que tout soldat, fût-il simple fantassin ou général d'armée, se doit de respecter, sous peine d'être puni à discrétion :

> FLUELLEN. Captain MacMorris, when there is more better opportunity to be required, look you, I will be so bold as to tell you I know the disciplines of war, and there is an end. (III.2.141-142)

Ainsi, par cette mise en abyme dans son propre texte de la lecture des traités militaires comme sources des « disciplines de la guerre », au moment où lui-même met en scène des batailles nationales dans ses *Henriades*[4], Shakespeare s'amuse sans doute à se mettre lui-même en scène dans le personnage de Fluellen afin d'avouer ses évidents emprunts à toutes sortes de manuels au moment même où il en abuse.

Shakespeare, encore dans la tradition maniériste d'un John Lyly[5], irrévérencieux de lui-même et en pleine connivence implicite avec son spectateur, ironise en effet sur sa manière de faire théâtre de certains préceptes afférents à la « discipline militaire » que Fluellen se vante d'avoir prospectés[6], d'autant qu'au passage il emprunte *verbatim* ce jargon militaire — « the military discipline » (III.2.101-102) — à nombre de manuels militaires anglais qui, à cette époque, abondent en Angleterre[7], comme le rappelle Paola Pugliatti :

> The flourishing of war manuals in those years […] may have been, on the one hand, from the impact of the actual military enterprises of the period and, on the other, from the renewed chivalric spirit which accompanied them. Maurice Cockle lists no less than forty titles of books about war published in English between 1578 and 1600, including new editions and translations[8].

Il y aura donc tout lieu de s'interroger dans cet article sur le savoir militaire de Fluellen, qui ne cesse de revendiquer les « disciplines de la guerre », mais aussi sur la fonction du personnage lui-même : Shakespeare ne l'aurait-il pas chargé de se faire à sa place le chantre de tout ce savoir militaire tel qu'il s'est popularisé grâce à une floraison de traités militaires dans la seconde moitié du XVI^e^ siècle ? À ce titre, ne serait-il pas judicieux de retenir les traités militaires comme sources possibles mises en œuvre pour la représentation sinon des batailles elles-mêmes, du moins du monde militaire tel que le représente Shakespeare ? Le dramaturge aurait-il consulté des traités militaires en plus des récits des chroniqueurs Edward Hall et Raphael Holinshed — récits qui sont déjà presque des traités de stratégies militaires en soi ? Bien qu'il existe à ce jour peu de preuves tangibles que Shakespeare et ses contemporains aient eu à lire certains de ces traités pour concevoir leurs scènes de batailles, l'élite militaire élisabéthaine, quant à elle — dont les généraux les plus proches de la reine —, accordait une place de premier plan aux écrits militaires qui circulaient à cette époque en Angleterre.

I. La prolifération des traités militaires à l'époque élisabéthaine

Dans *Agents Beyond the State: The Writings of English Travelers, Soldiers, and Diplomats in Early Modern Europe*, Mark Netzloff soutient que le bruissement de menaces de bataille sur le théâtre des guerres européennes est contemporain de la prolifération de ces traités militaires et contribua très largement à la diffusion d'un savoir miliaire dans tous les cercles sociaux, du fantassin de la plus basse extraction à l'élite militaire élisabéthaine :

> […] late Elizabethan England was in the midst of a period of militarization, a ubiquitous concern for national security in which the nation was placed on a constant war footing. Through the growth of military administration at the local level, one of the chief ways that state power could spread itself through each region of the country, military affairs were injected into national life at the lowest levels, where they touched the life of almost every citizen. The unprecedented textual production of military treatises further contributed to the militarization of the population, widely disseminating knowledge of military ranks, strategy, and even drills and battle formations to a reading public[9].

Dès 1578, dans un manuel intitulé *Allarme to England*[10]*,* Barnabe Riche, promu au grade de capitaine pour services rendus à la Couronne d'Angleterre aux Pays-Bas, déplore, comme Fluellen, le déclin de la discipline martiale, et entreprend de recenser les règles de la guerre en vue de remédier à ces manquements : « I haue taken paynes more than ynough, to write of warres, or of warlike disciplines[11] ». Ces règles, si elles sont appliquées et respectées à la lettre, ont pour but, en principe, de conjurer des défaites, semblables à celle de la tragédie du sac d'Anvers (1576)[12], dramatisé dans une pièce anonyme très sanglante, *Alarum for London or the Siedge of Antwerp*[13] (1602), qui dénonce les exactions perpétrées par l'armée espagnole de Philippe II d'Espagne — exactions que Fluellen aurait très certainement condamnées, eût-il été présent. Ces atrocités laissèrent dans les esprits une impression presque aussi violente que le massacre de la Saint-Barthélémy qui eut lieu en France en 1572. Or dans son traité militaire, Riche n'a de cesse de convoquer la tragédie du sac d'Anvers comme une forme d'avertissement concret de ce qui pourrait advenir à une armée indisciplinée qui ne respecterait pas les règles de la guerre : « doe but remember what happened to Antwerpe, where they wanted neither men, nor any provision for the wars. But they wanted souldiers to direct them, and men of vnderstanding to incourage them[14] ».

Dans la même veine, Robert Dudley, comte de Leicester et général de l'armée d'Élisabeth I^re^, alors qu'il est missionné aux Provinces-Unies des Pays-Bas[15], l'un des plus puissants bastions anti-papistes[16] du protestantisme calviniste, écrit ses *Lawes and Ordinances* (1586) où il recense les « disciplines de la guerre » que son corps militaire doit suivre pour triompher des forces espagnoles. De fait, il définit les deux acceptions du mot discipline — d'une part comme science du métier des armes et d'autre part au sens plus traditionnel de respect des lois, dont l'interdiction des rapines, des larcins et des viols, édictés à l'attention des militaires comme des autres :

> […] martiall discipline aboue all thinges (proper to men of warre) is by vs at this time most to be followed, aswell for the aduancement of Gods

> glorie, as honourablie to gouerne this Armie in good order: And least that the euill inclined (pleading simplicitie) shoulde couer any wicked facte by ignorance: Therefore these martiall Ordinances and Lawes following are established and published, whereby all good mindes endeuouring to attaine honour, may stand armed, and receiue encouragement to perseuere in well doing, and such as are inclined to lewdenesse, be warned from committing offences punishable. Which being embraced with carefull respect, and followed with obedience, doe promise good order and agreement amongst our selues, with victorie and good euents against our enemies[17].

Robert Dudley adresse aussi, conformément aux règles d'usage, son traité militaire à toute l'armée et aux loyaux sujets de la Reine Élisabeth I^re^ qui la servent dans sa lutte contre le joug du roi d'Espagne : « […] meete and fitte to be obserued by all such shall serue her Maiestie vnder him in the said Countries, and therefore to be published and notified to the whole Armie[18] ». Dans *A Path-Way to Military Practise*, Barnabe Riche souhaite également non seulement se placer sous le patronage de sa reine souveraine mais également lui témoigner son dévouement :

> Wee your loouinge subiectes (feeling the benefit of your peaceable gouernement) haue no lesse cause to giue God all honour and glory, and daily to pray for the longe conti|nuaunce of so gracious a princesse[19].

L'élite militaire accordait ainsi manifestement une place considérable aux traités sur la guerre et à la formation militaire de l'armée. Dans une lettre de 1580, Sir Philip Sidney, un des plus célèbres officiers de l'armée d'Élisabeth et neveu très cher de Robert Dudley, encourage son frère, Robert Sidney, à approfondir et à organiser son savoir sur l'*ars militaris* :

> [You should] note the examples of virtue and vice, with their good and evil successes, the establishment or ruins of great estates, with the causes, the time, and circumstances then written of, the enterings and endings of war, and therein, the stratagems against the enemy, and the discipline upon the soldier; and thus, much as a very historiographer […]. I wish herein that when yow reade any such thing, yow straite bring it to your head. […] Lay it up in the right place […], as either military or, especially defensive military, or more particularly defensive by fortification[20].

Ainsi cette lettre montre-t-elle que la lecture assidue des traités militaires fait partie intégrante de la formation militaire des officiers supérieurs et très certainement aussi des sous-officiers, et que l'application de Fluellen à connaître ses sources ne serait pas seulement un effet de pittoresque. Il semble que l'élite militaire ait participé ainsi activement à la culture militaire du pays et que officiers et soldats aient été manifestement bien informés sur la « discipline » et la pratique de la guerre. Dans une traduction de Peter Betham datée de 1544, James Purlilia, illustre soldat de l'empereur du Saint-Empire Ferdinand I^er^, affirme, en effet, qu'une armée peu instruite dans les rudiments de la guerre court inévitablement à sa perte :

> For theyr vnskylfulnesse is the great destructio, of the whole hoste, when they knowe not howe for to kepe theyr arraye, nae yet what to do,

> but lyke men astonysshed, voyde of all warlye knowledge, and nowe to learne the feates of warre, in whose hand the chyfe parte of the battayle doth stand, begynne to staye and proffer theyr backes[21].

Dans un traité de 1585, *The Honorable Reputation of a Souldier*, George Whetstone, lui-même soldat de l'armée d'Élisabeth I^re^ et dramaturge, élève à son tour la formation militaire au rang de vertu — au sens premier de *virtus*, c'est-à-dire impliquant le courage viril — que tout soldat se doit de posséder : « To say trueth, learning is the most pretious Ornament of a Souldier, and the necessariest vertue[22] ». On croirait entendre les fiers commentaires de Fluellen dans *Henry V* : « I know the disciplines of war » (III.2.141).

Dans *A Briefe Discourse of Warre. Written by Sir Roger Williams Knight, with his Opinion concerning some parts of the Martiall Discipline*[23] (1590), Williams, éminent soldat gallois qui servit sous le commandement de Robert Dudley à la bataille de Zutphen (1586), puis à la mort de ce dernier sous les ordres de Robert Devereux, se réfère aux exploits militaires des plus grands généraux pour recenser ses propres « disciplines de la guerre » : « [Souldiers] must maintaine good Discipline […][24] ». À ce propos, il convoque César — le nommant « The most worthiest Caesar[25] » —, ce grand général romain que Shakespeare associera à la figure d'Essex dans *Henry V* quand il croit encore pouvoir célébrer sa victoire en Irlande. Dès lors que Williams adresse son traité au général d'Essex — « To the most honorable, my singular and best Lord, Robert Earle of Essex[26] » —, on peut en déduire qu'à ses yeux, Essex est en quelque sorte rien de moins que le « nouveau César », ainsi d'ailleurs qu'il sera intronisé par un récit hagiographique dans le Chœur de l'acte V de la pièce de Shakespeare — « Conquering Caesar » (V.0.28) — en anticipation de son retour triomphal. C'est donc dire l'implication de l'idéologie dans des arts visuels comme le théâtre sous couvert de mettre en scène l'histoire nationale et la victoire éclatante du triomphateur d'Azincourt.

Or c'est ce même Robert Devereux, comte d'Essex, parti en Irlande le 27 mars 1599, afin d'y combattre la rébellion menée par Tyrone[27], qui, autour de cette même année, dans *Lawes and Orders of Warre Established for the Good Conduct of the Service in Ireland*[28], publie ses propres « disciplines de la guerre », qu'il adresse, en dédicace, d'une part, aux « hautes autorités militaires » mais également aux « soldats » et, d'autre part, aux « sujets de la Reine » :

> To all Officers of the Armie, and all Coronels, Captaines, Officers and Souldiers of Companies, and all her Maiesties Subiectes and others, whom these Lawes and Orders ensuing respectiuely and seuerally shall concerne. Forasmuch as no good seruice can be perfourmed, or warre well managed where Military discipline is not obserued; And Military discipline cannot bee kept where the Rules or chiefe partes thereof bee not certainly set downe and generally knowen […][29].

« The discipline of Warre shall be strictly kept[30] », stipule expressément Essex. Shakespeare semble se faire l'écho de Robert Devereux, lorsqu'il délègue à Fluellen le soin de faire régner la discipline militaire sur le champ de bataille, sinon d'en réprimer les infractions : « discipline ought to be used » (III.6.55). Ce capitaine exemplaire semble ainsi être le porte-parole des préceptes énoncés par Essex dans son traité militaire. Serait-ce une manière plus subtile de faire l'éloge du général d'Élisabeth I^re^ ?

Incidemment, on trouve une représentation graphique d'un capitaine d'infanterie, gravée en 1587 par le graveur hollandais Hendrik Goltzius[31] (1558-1617), qui, soucieux d'enseigner les

« disciplines de la guerre », reflète un idéal soldatesque, comme en témoigne la légende latine accompagnant l'estampe : « Præuius infractos reddo Dux Martis alumnos, / Spernere dum doceo cuncta pericla, meo », que l'on pourrait traduire par « Moi, capitaine de l'armée, je rends mes disciples invincibles, je circule pour leur enseigner à conjurer tous les dangers ». De fait, on peut voir un impeccable « déroulement », au sens propre du terme, de manœuvres en arrière-plan :



1. Hendrik Goltzius, *The Captain of Infantry* (1587).
Gravure sur cuivre, 28,5 x 19,2 cm.
Crédits. Londres, British Museum.

Comment ne pas voir une possible parenté entre ce capitaine hollandais et le valeureux capitaine Fluellen qui s'évertue à maintenir la discipline sur le champ de bataille d'Azincourt ?

À bien y regarder, tous ces traités militaires qui circulent en Angleterre forment un véritable « art militaire[32] », voire un « art de la guerre », apparentés à ce titre au traité de Machiavel, traduit en anglais en 1562 par Peter Whitehorne sous l'intitulé « *The Arte of Warre*[33] ». William Garrard, quant à lui, intitule son propre manuel *The Arte of Warre Beeing the Onely Rare Booke of Myllitarie Profession: drawne out of all our Late and Forraine Seruices*[34] (1591).

II. Les emprunts patents de Shakespeare

Dans une thèse soutenue en 1956, intitulée *Shakespeare's Military World*, Paul A. Jorgensen est l'un des premiers à suggérer que le dramaturge emprunte très certainement à des préceptes édictés dans les manuels militaires qui circulaient à cette époque, tout en montrant le travail restant encore à faire pour sortir ces textes de l'anonymat : « Still we have not exhausted the riches available to a dramatist who took the pains to read current descriptions of the captaincy

in newsbook and military treatrise[35] ». Selon ce critique, Shakespeare ferait référence au traité de James Purlilia, *The Precepts of Warre*[36], lorsque, dans *Henry V*, il fait entendre le grave et pompeux Fluellen condamnant Gower pour son indiscipline et son tapage nocturne sur le champ de bataille :

> FLUELLEN. If you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great you shall find, I warrant you, that there is no tiddle-taddle nor pebble-pabble in Pompey's camp. I warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars, and the cares of it, and the forms of it, and the sobriety of it, and the modesty of it, to be otherwise.
> GOWER. Why, the enemy is loud, you hear him all night.
> FLUELLEN. If the enemy is an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb, is it meet, think you, that we should also, look you, be an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb, in your own conscience now?
> GOWER. I will speak lower.
> FLUELLEN. I pray you beseech you that you will.
> *Exeunt*
> KING HENRY V. Though it appear a little out of fashion,
> There is much care and valour in this Welshman (IV.1.69-82).

En apportant ce commentaire un peu moqueur mais favorable à Fluellen via le roi Henry V présent en scène, Shakespeare pourrait bien, à nouveau, utiliser le mécanisme de la mise en abyme pour signaler tout le profit qu'il tire lui-même, au même titre que Fluellen, des emprunts à ces traités militaires. Dans ce passage, Jorgensen suppose que Shakespeare se réfère à Purlilia, qui rapporte l'ordre donné par Pompée à ses soldats de progresser discrètement et en silence sur le champ de bataille[37] : « takyng example of Pompey […] warned al his soldiours pryuily to go wtout any brute or noyse makyng[38] ».

De même Shakespeare emprunte-t-il sans doute *verbatim*, à travers le personnage de Fluellen, à des manuels militaires sur la question éminemment technique des mines. C'est au nom de son savoir sur cet « *ars militaris* » — « Arte militarie[39] », ainsi que le présente l'auteur lui-même John Smythe — que, lorsque Gower l'informe, au début de la scène, que le duc de Gloucester le somme de se rendre aux mines creusées par les sapeurs pour approcher des murailles d'Harfleur sans être vu, ni atteint par les forces ennemies, Fluellen s'insurge contre l'ordre au vu de la concavité des parois de la mine qu'il juge techniquement erratique :

> GOWER. Captain Fluellen, you must come presently to the mines: the Duke of Gloucester would speak with you.
> FLUELLEN. To the mines? Tell you the duke it is not so good to come to the mines: for look you, the mines is not according to the disciplines of the war; the concavities of it is not sufficient. For look you, th'athversary, you may discuss unto the duke, look you, is digg'd himself four yard under the countermines. By Cheshu, I think a will plow up all, if there is not better directions. (III.2.54-64).

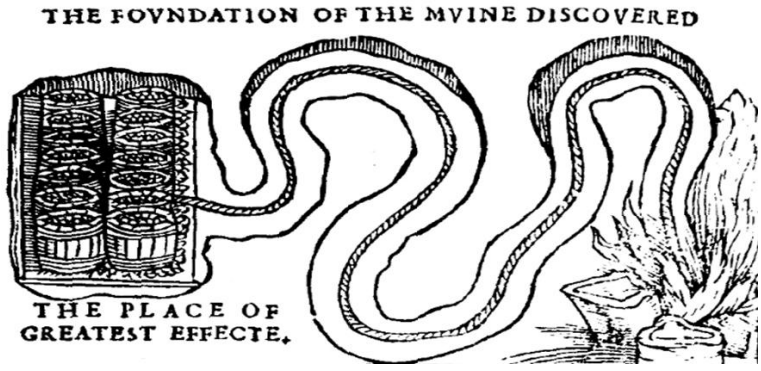
Faute de meilleures instructions — « disciplines of the war » — sur la manière de creuser une mine, Fluellen se pense condamné à une mort certaine : il craint que les Français ne profitent de cette concavité insuffisante pour creuser une contremine quatre pas au-dessous et faire sauter les troupes anglaises qui tenteraient une « brèche ». Shakespeare fait probablement écho aux préceptes énoncés par William Garrard sur l'art et la manière de creuser une contremine :

> These walled Countermines, seeme to be sufficient to finde out any other hidden or secrete deceite of ye enemie, neither nought they in my judgement, to be dispraised, as some doe, which cause them not to be made in their fortifications, alledging for their ercuse, the auoyding of expence, which presumption, perchance in the ende, will become the cause of theyr ruine[40].

Comme en témoignent les mots de ce passage repris *verbatim* — « countermines », « sufficient » —, Fluellen semble posséder la connaissance livresque, mais précise, d'au moins un de ces traités militaires de l'époque lorsqu'il proteste devant ce qu'il considère être un manquement aux recommandations militaires. Ainsi Garrard insistait-il sur le fait que les parois de la mine doivent être suffisamment larges pour permettre de contrer une attaque surprise destinée à enterrer vivants les soldats ennemis qui se risqueraient « sur la brèche ». Fluellen — qui de surcroît a des lettres et connaît son Machiavel sur cette question technique des mines — se réfère à ce sujet aux « règles des Romains » — « roman disciplines » (III.3.73). De fait, dans *The Arte of Warre*, Machiavel, en renvoyant déjà à ce propos à la science romaine, consacre justement toute une section sur l'art de creuser une mine — « *Of Muynes and Placing of Poulder vnder Groundre, Wherewith Invinsible Fortresses, by Fire maye be Ruignated, when Ordinaunce cannot be broughte vnto them* » — sans oublier les dangers que représente le « déminage » lui-même :

> Also it wold be taken hede of, that the caue be not by no other means marde, so that the fyre maye breake oute: for which cause, it ought to be made, with the beginning therof sumwhat distate fro the place, that you mynde to ouerthrowe: to the intente that in makinge therof, the men of the same place doo not issue oute to lette you, nor perceiue the certayne place of the hurte, to be able to prouyde for it, and to make countermuynes to let the fyre brethe oute and pas withoute enie effecte, whereby all yowr coste and labor, maye becum vayne[41].

Incidemment, on trouve une estampe, insérée dans le texte même de Machiavel, qui illustre le péril que représente une « contremine » quand l'ennemi a découvert le lieu miné — on croirait y voir concrètement le danger que veut conjurer Fluellen :



2. Nicholas Machiavell, *The Arte of Warre, written first in Italian by Nicholas Machiavell, and set for the in Englishe by Peter Whitehorn*e (1544).
Gravure sur bois, 6,7 x 11,2 cm, *op. cit*., sig. [B3^{r}].

On comprend donc peut-être mieux la colère de Fluellen et son audace contre un grand officier comme le Duc de Gloucester et plus particulièrement contre son capitaine Irlandais Macmorris qui visiblement concevait ses mines sans la « science romaine » que Fluellen ne manque pas de recommander : « He has no more directions in the true disciplines of the wars, look you, of the Roman disciplines, than is a puppy dog » (III.3.71-74).

Fluellen n'était pas le seul à mettre en garde les soldats contre une mauvaise application des « disciplines de la guerre » en matière de construction d'une mine. Richard Hakluyt, témoin non fictif d'une explosion en 1589, dénonçait déjà les dangers d'une telle pratique dans ses célèbres *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation made by Sea or Over-land […]*[42], texte publié d'abord en 1589, mais réédité dans une édition augmentée en 1599-1600 :

> The same night the Miners were set to worke againe, who by the second day after had wrought very well into the foundation of the wall. Against which time the companies being in readinesse […] fire was given to the train of the mine, which blew up halfe the tower under which the powder was planted. The assailants having in charge upon the effecting of the mine presently to give the assault, performed it accordingly: but too soone: for having entred the top of the breach, the other halfe of the tower, with which the first force of the powder had onely shaken and made loose, fell upon our men: under which were buried about twenty or thirty, then being under that part of the tower[43].

Cette explosion ressemble à celle que prédit, sinon redoute, Fluellen : « I think a will plow up all, if there is not better directions » (III.2.64). Cette prédiction de plus n'est pas dépourvue de réalité historique, si l'on en croit la traduction de *Vita Henrici Quinti* (c. 1437-1438) par Tito Livio Frulovisi, qui fait le récit d'une « bataille dans les mines » pendant le siège d'Harfleur :

> And the Duke of Clarence commanded on his partie his myners to vndermyne the grounde, in intent by that meane to surprise his enemie sodenlie within the Towne; but there aduerse partie, aduertised thereof, countermined the Englishmen. At whose meetinge wthin the grounde was a cruell and deadly conflict, but finallie the English were frustrate of theire intent, and were compelled to desist from the enterprise […][44].

Le savoir très livresque de Fluellen sur la guerre ne semble pas, en définitive, si ridicule qu'il y paraît, malgré la volonté de Shakespeare d'accentuer le comique du personnage. Ainsi commence-t-on à comprendre que Shakespeare puisse à la fois faire revivre sur scène les grands manuels militaires de son temps, tout en montrant implicitement sa méthode de travail, l'insidieux détournement moqueur de l'auteur maniériste.

Le dramaturge emprunte *verbatim* s'il le faut à des « traités militaires », écrits de la plume des grands officiers et généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^, notamment pour évoquer l'épisode du siège d'Harfleur, où le roi Henry V, *a contrario* des traités, menace les femmes des pires sévices, si elles devaient être faites prisonnières. Dans son second traité militaire, publié en 1586 à Leyde, intitulé *Lawes and Ordinances Militarie*[45], Robert Dudley, au nom de la « discipline de la guerre », s'indigne que l'on puisse « souiller » — « defile » — les femmes, les veuves et les vierges :

> And insomuch as clemencie amongst men of warre in some respectes is a singular virtue: it is ordained that no man in any part of this seruice that he shall doe, shal lay violent handes vpon any woman with childe, or lying in childebed, olde persons, widowes, yong virgins, or babes, without especiall order from the Magistrate, vpon paine of death. Noe man of what degree so euer he be, shal enforce any wife, widowe, maide or virgin, and by violence defile anie of them vppon paine of death[46].

C'est en vertu de cette règle de conduite militaire que, dans *A Larum for London* (1582), l'aveugle Harman, lui-même autrefois soldat, implore les troupes espagnoles de ne pas commettre d'atrocités envers les plus « faibles » — « Olde men, weake women, and poore wretched infants, / Should be respected in the heate of slaughter. / O doe not this foule injurie to armes[47] ». De même, dans *The Pathwaie to Martiall Discipline […]* (1582), Thomas Styward condamne également tout soldat qui s'aventurerait à souiller une femme : « Item, that no man of what degrée soeuer he be of, shall commit adulterie with maried wiues, nor inforce widdowes, maids or virgins: & by violence defile them, shall without mercie be punished with death[48] ». Dans la droite ligne de ces théoriciens, George Whetstone stipule lui aussi que les prisonnières de guerre ne doivent pas être violées : « [It is] specially commanded, that the wemen which were taken in the warres, should bee kept from being defiled[49] ». Essex formule le même impératif catégorique dans son propre traité — toute personne commettant un viol ou des violences contre des femmes sera punie de la peine de mort : « Rapes, Ravishments, unnaturall abuses, shall be punished with death[50] ». Or, dans la pièce historique, Henry V reprend *verbatim* le vocable — « defile » — dans sa menace — « Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters » — au moment où il ne recule devant aucune outrance dans la cruauté pour décrire les « misères » et « malheurs » qui seront infligés aux innocents habitants de la ville d'Harfleur et à leurs femmes s'ils refusent d'ouvrir les portes de la forteresse, preuve probable que Shakespeare pourrait avoir eu connaissance de ces traités militaires :

> If not, why, in a moment look to see
> The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
> Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
> Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
> And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
> Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
> Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
> Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
> At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
> What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid?
> Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroy'd. (III.3.33-43)

Le roi adopte ainsi une attitude interdite par les lois ordinaires de la guerre, bien qu'elle soit pratiquée et surtout efficace puisque la menace atteint son objectif. Ainsi discerne-t-on — même a contrario — une parenté entre la pièce de théâtre et les traités militaires qui circulaient à l'époque élisabéthaine, dont une filiation patente entre les préceptes des généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^ et le personnage d'Henry V qui s'en fait le chantre en les empruntant à l'envi.

Henry V se montre néanmoins un fervent défenseur de la discipline militaire au sein de son armée qui réprime toute conspiration avec l'ennemi. Parmi les premières règles, sinon les plus

importantes, édictées par Dudley, figure le principe ferme que quiconque comploterait contre sa « Majesté » sera « supplicié et exécuté » :

> Whosoever shall conceale, or in any sort keepe secrete, Treason, any dangerous Conspiracie, or other practise which may be hurtfull, and may concerne the perill of her Maiesties person, or of her General, or the estate of this Armie, and shall not with all diligence reueale the same either vnto the Generall, or some other Officer of especiall trust, shal incurre the paines of death with tormets[51].

Le comte d'Essex stipule également que tout soldat qui conspire contre sa propre armée sera arrêté pour intelligence avec l'ennemi et condamné pour trahison :

> No man whether hee be Souldier or other, English or Irish, shal haue conference or intelligence with any enemy or Rebell, that is in open action against her Maiestie, or harbour or receiue any such within the Campe, or any Towne, Fort, Castell, or Garrison, or shall sende or procure to be sent any victuall, munition or other reliefe to any enemy or Rebel in action, vpon paine of death: Except, such as shalbe auowed and warranted by me (or those that shall commaunde the Army in mine absence) to speake, conferre, or haue intelligence, or commerce with the enemy or Rebels[52].

Ainsi Shakespeare semble-t-il reprendre l'esprit et les mots du texte de ces sources, lorsqu'il s'ingénie à mettre en scène la condamnation des traîtres — « ces monstres anglais » (II.2.84) — qui, en échange de « quelques misérables couronnes », se sont engagés à « conspirer » contre leur roi et ont juré d'attenter à sa vie[53] :

> HENRY V. See you, my princes and my noble peers,
> These English monsters! My lord of Cambridge here,
> You know how apt our love was to accord
> To furnish him with all appertinents
> Belonging to his honour; and this man
> Hath for a few light crowns lightly conspired
> And sworn unto the practices of France
> To kill us here in Hampton. […]
> 'Tis so strange
> That though the truth of if stands off as gross
> As black and white, my eye will scarcely see it.
> Treason and murder ever kept together […].
> I will weep for thee,
> For this revolt of thine, methinks, is like
> Another fall of man. —Their faults are open.
> Arrest them to the answer of the law,
> And God acquit them of their practices! (II.2.84-91 ; 102-105 ; 140-142)

En roi avisé, Henry V, intraitable, se conforme ainsi à la lettre aux préceptes édictés par Dudley et Essex : tout traître doit être exécuté. La pièce de Shakespeare serait-elle une œuvre hagiographique voire idéologique au service des grands généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^, et plus particulièrement d'Essex auquel il fait directement référence dans la pièce, dans le Chœur V ?

Pourtant, en dépit de sa volonté de faire régner la discipline militaire, Henry V commet encore une infraction aux règles de la discipline militaire à la fin de bataille d'Azincourt en exécutant les prisonniers, exécution que Fluellen condamne comme « expressément contraire aux lois de la guerre » : « 'Tis expressly against the law of arms » (IV.7.1-2). Toutefois, en 1586, Robert Dudley suggérait une perspective radicalement différente sur cette difficile question du traitement réservé aux prisonniers de guerre, en expliquant que seul un « général d'armée » était habilité à donner un ordre de cette nature, semblable à celui que donne Henry V dans la pièce :

> Euery Souldier shall present such prisoners as are taken to their Captaine immediatly at their returne to the Campe, and none shall either kill them, or license them to depart, without commaundement or leaue from the Generall, or other head Officer thereunto appointed, vpon paine of being disarmed, and banished the Campe[54].

Dudley affirme ainsi qu'aux grades les plus élevés, les généraux seuls ou apparentés étaient exemptés de cette règle d'humanité envers les prisonniers : le roi fait loi. Ainsi, quand la critique accuse Henry V d'être un roi machiavélique, en l'accusant de crimes de guerre[55], le dotant d'une nature sombre portée à la « barbarie », elle pourrait en réalité faire une lecture biaisée des réalités des « disciplines de la guerre », qui sont plus nuancées dans les traités. En condamnant son roi pour avoir commis la plus « parfaite infamie », Fluellen pense probablement en termes de militaire du rang et non pas au niveau du commandement suprême qui concerne les grands généraux qui gouvernent. Shakespeare se montre donc bien informé des traités qu'il avait sans doute lus. En revanche, selon les préceptes édictés par Essex, toute exécution de sang-froid de prisonniers de guerre ayant déposé les armes et s'étant rendus est formellement interdite : « None shall kill an enemy who yeelds, and throwes down his Armes[56] ». Ainsi Henry V contrevient-il nettement aux « disciplines de la guerre » lorsqu'il donne l'ordre d'exécuter les soldats français[57], preuve possible voire probable que le dramaturge suit le détail du manuel militaire d'Essex à la loupe : « […] every soldier kill his prisoners. / Give the word through » (IV.6.37-38). On comprend donc mieux pourquoi Fluellen dénonce cet acte comme la plus « parfaite infamie » qu'on puisse perpétrer en conscience : « 'Tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can be offert, in your conscience now, is it not ? » (IV.7.2-4). Il est ainsi manifeste que Shakespeare emprunte pour cette scène moins à Dudley qu'au général d'Essex.

Dudley précise, en outre, que tout prisonnier doit être présenté et rendu à son « capitaine », sous peine d'être dégradé et banni du camp : « All the soldiers are to present the prisoners they have taken to their captain as soon as they return to camp, and no one is to kill them or let them go, on pain of being disarmed and banished from the camp[58] ». Ainsi Hotspur enfreint-il les règles de la guerre dans *1 Henry IV*[59] quand il refuse de rendre les prisonniers de guerre et se rebelle contre son roi Henry IV, lequel exige que lui soient livrés ces soldats, prisonniers que le jeune prince comptait échanger contre son beau-frère Edmond Mortimer[60]. De fait, la colère du roi paraît parfaitement légitime et justifiée :

> HENRY IV. Why, yet he doth deny his prisoners,
> But with proviso and exception,
> That we at our own charge shall ransom straight
> His brother-in-law, the foolish Mortimer;
> Who, on my soul, hath wilfully betray'd
> The lives of those that he did lead to fight
> Against that great magician, damn'd Glendower,
> Whose daughter, as we hear, the Earl of March

> Hath lately married. Shall our coffers, then,
> Be emptied to redeem a traitor home?
> Shall we but treason? and indent with fears,
> When they have lost and forfeited themselves?
> No, on the barren mountains let him starve;
> For I shall never hold that man my friend
> Whose tongue shall ask me for one penny cost
> To ransom home revolted Mortimer. (*1 Henry IV*, I.3.77-92)

Shakespeare rend ainsi visible sur scène des références lisibles, venues de manuels militaires qui, manifestement, dénoncent toutes formes d'indiscipline et d'insubordination.

III. L'art shakespearien d'ironiser sur les « disciplines de la guerre » ?

Cette indiscipline militaire, Shakespeare s'ingénie pourtant aussi à la mettre en scène sous la forme de soldats indisciplinés chargés d'illustrer la rupture avec les « disciplines de la guerre » et la grande tradition de *virtus* des généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^. À travers des poltrons comiques, le dramaturge s'amuse à opposer la rectitude des lois intangibles des traités militaires à la constante transgression de ces mêmes règles par une démarche éminemment disruptive et subversive. Cette pratique viserait-elle à tourner en dérision un sujet sérieux pour mieux ironiser sur son austérité ? Le spectateur doit-il, dès lors, se gausser de ces subversions comiques ou prêter une oreille plus attentive aux règles de la guerre ainsi détournées à l'envi ? Doit-on y voir un message plus sérieux voire ouvertement politique ? Selon Robert Dudley, en vertu du code moral de conduite militaire, tout soldat vivant de rapines et de larcins ou commettant des pillages est passible de peine de mort : « No man shall robbe or spoyle any Shop or Tent, or any victualler or Marchant coming for reliefe of the Campe or garrison, but in all good sort shall entertaine and defend them, vpon paine of death[61] ». Dans *Lawes and Ordinances*[62], rédigé par le comte d'Essex, mais publié à titre posthume en 1642, sans doute à cause de la censure exercée par la reine à la suite de la disgrâce de ce général en 1599, on apprend que nul ne peut « dépouiller » un soldat tombé sur le champ d'honneur, fût-il blessé ou sur le point de succomber : « No man shall take or spoile the Goods of him that dieth, or is killed in Service, upon pain of restoring double the value, and arbitrary punishment[63] ». Ainsi, dans *3 Henry VI*[64], le père transgresse les « disciplines de la guerre » par le vol de quelques pièces d'or sur une victime qu'il vient de tuer, sans se douter que ses bras seront le linceul de son propre fils[65] :

> FATHER. Thou that so stoutly hath resisted me,
> Give me thy gold, if thou hast any gold,
> For I have bought it with an hundred blows.
> But let me see: is this our foeman's face?
> Ah, no, no, no, it is my only son! (II.5.73-83)

Selon la même loi dérivant de ces traités militaires, Bardolph, jadis ami de la taverne du roi, sera pendu pour avoir volé un ciboire — « [Bardolph] is like to be executed for robbing a church » (III.6.99-100) —, preuve que la discipline militaire l'emporte sur l'affect et que les règles militaires sont immuables :

> HENRY V. We would have all such offenders so cut off: and we give express charge, that in our marches through the country, there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner. (III.7.106-112)

Ainsi Henry V incarne-t-il un idéal militaire fait roi en conformité à nouveau avec les règles de Dudley et d'Essex : il veille à ce que la discipline règne sur le champ de bataille, en dépit des amitiés passées. Incidemment, on trouve de nombreuses estampes tardives, puisque publiées en 1633, de Jacques Callot, mais intitulées *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*, qui représentent la « soldatesque » — déjà présente sur le plateau du théâtre shakespearien — et les pendaisons de soldats vivant de rapines, autrement dit enfreignant les « disciplines de la guerre », si précieuses à Henry V et à son capitaine Fluellen :



3. Jacques Callot, *La pendaison* (1633).
Gravure à l'eau-forte, 7,2 x 18,4 cm.
Crédits. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Cette estampe offre une représentation glaçante de soldats pendus pour avoir vécu de maraudes : Bardolph pourrait très bien faire partie de ces malheureux soldats que la guerre n'épargne pas, au même titre que les fantassins chargés de livrer bataille.

Selon Robert Dudley, à nouveau, et comme dans la pièce, aucun fantassin chargé de monter à l'assaut ou de tenter une brèche, conformément au code d'honneur, ne peut désobéir à un ordre direct et « déserter » le champ de bataille — « absent himself from the place » —, sous peine d'être exécuté :

> No man appointed to the defence of any Breach, Trench, or Streight, either Captaine or Souldiour, shall willingly leaue it, or vpon any false or imagined cause or excuse shall absent himself from the place, without sufficient warrant, vpon paine of death[66].

Le ton du comte d'Essex se fait péremptoire dans le traité lorsqu'il condamne l'affront que représente un tel manquement à la discipline de la guerre : « No man shall throw away his armes, or abandon his Ensigne, Cornet, or Gwidon, or flie away in any Battell or Skirmish, upon paine of death[67] ». Aussi ajoute-t-il que tout soldat faisant défection devra en répondre devant un conseil de guerre :

> A Regiment, or Company of Horse or Foote, that chargeth the enemy, and retreates before they come to handy-strokes, shal answer it before a Councell of War; and if the fault be found in the Officers, they shal be banished the Camp; if in the Souldiers, then every tenth man shal be punished at discretion, and the rest serve for Pioniers and Scavengers, til a worthy exployt take off that Blot[68].

Shakespeare n'hésite pas à mettre en scène cet aspect même de la discipline militaire sur le mode de la dérision comique — preuve supplémentaire qu'il suit probablement de très près ces traités militaires. Ainsi de la prise de la ville d'Harfleur, alors que le roi Henry V soi-même somme ses forces armées de tenter d'ouvrir une brèche et que Shakespeare choisit les soldats les plus couards — autrement dit les plus indisciplinés — pour s'y refuser, préférant la désertion[69] avec cette excuse paradoxale pour un militaire de n'avoir pas d'autre « vie de rechange ». Négligeant les ordres, Nym et Pistol s'attardent à l'arrière, et Pistol se met à chantonner. Le rythme binaire et les rimes plates de la chansonnette tournent en ridicule rien de moins que le style héroïque lui-même : la base du traité de discipline militaire sert ici la parodie comique, avec Pistol empruntant à quelque rengaine supposée prôner ce qu'ils récusent :

> FLUELLEN. On, on, on, on, on, to the breach, to the breach!
> NYM. Pray thee corporal, stay, the knocks are too hot; and for mine own part I have not a case of lives. The humour of it is too hot, that is the very plain-song of it.
> PISTOL. The plain-song is most just, for humours do abound. Knocks go and come, God's vassals drop and die,
> And sword and shield
> In bloody shield
> Doth win immortal fame. (III.2.1-11)

Les soldats comiques apparaissent ainsi comme tels en contrepoint des valeurs héroïques portées par Henry V, « manière » pour Shakespeare de jouer avec la rigueur des manuels militaires. Il s'amuse même à pousser plus loin la transgression des « règles de la guerre » en faisant du bravache Pistolet un matamore, un minable et ridicule fanfaron qui déclame rodomontades sur rodomontades pour feindre de jouer le rôle d'un preux chevalier, alors qu'il est un poltron notoire. C'est le matamore Pistolet qui est considéré en effet à tort par Monsieur le Fer — pur représentant des seuls valeurs militaires, comme son nom l'indique —, comme un « chevalier, le seigneur le plus brave, le plus vaillant et le plus estimé d'Angleterre » (IV.4.57-58), noble statut qu'il n'hésite pas à usurper dans l'espoir d'obtenir « une tonne d'or » : « I will have forty moys, / Or I will fetch thy rim out at thy throat / In drops of crimson blood » (IV.4.13-15). Ainsi fait-il déferler sur Monsieur le Fer les « mots » qu'on dirait tirés d'un dictionnaire de citations qui aurait pu être le célèbre « Beehive », dont Shakespeare aurait fait usage[70] : « I'll fer him, and firk him, and ferret him : discuss the same in French unto him » (IV.4.28-29). Lui qui n'a jamais coupé une gorge prétend désormais être un combattant hors pair qui ne recule devant aucun danger. Pistolet brasse de l'air plus qu'il ne menace véritablement son adversaire. Shakespeare en fournit lui-même le commentaire avec le page soulignant à juste titre que ce matamore « a la langue assassine mais l'épée en repos » : « he hath a killing tongue and a quiet sword » (III.2.67). Incidemment, Pistolet pourrait parfaitement illustrer la figure du « Capitan » ou « Matamore » de la *Commedia dell'arte*, issu du *Miles Gloriosus* de Plaute, telle qu'elle est représentée dans une estampe de Jacques Callot, datant de 1621-1622 :



4. Jacques Callot*, Balli di Stessania, Scaramucia — Fricasso* (1621-1622).
Gravure à l'eau-forte, 7 x 9,2 cm.
Crédits. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Ce « matamore », ennemi des champs de batailles, ne dissimule son incompétence à suivre les principes des traités militaires, au même titre que Pistolet, que par des coups de lame dans le vent[71]. Si la posture se veut celle d'un combattant, tout n'est que tromperie et faux-semblants. On croirait l'entendre déclamer ses vantardises face à Monsieur le Fer : « Ouy, cuppele gorge, permafoy, peasant, unless thou give me crowns, brave crowns; or mangled shalt thou be by this my sword » (IV.4.30-32).

IV. Une œuvre hagiographique voire idéologique ?

Ces emprunts aux traités militaires des généraux d'Élisabeth I^re^, et plus particulièrement à ceux du général Essex, — et le renversement de l'intangible rigueur de leurs préceptes sous forme de soldats comiques subversifs — ne feraient-il pas d'*Henry V* une pièce hautement politique et dangereuse à plus d'un titre ? Outre la célébration du vainqueur d'Azincourt, Shakespeare s'inscrit dans la grande tradition des « triomphes »[72] pour dédier ouvertement au comte d'Essex un triomphe imaginaire, l'assimilant à rien de moins que le « victorieux César » embrochant la « rébellion de son épée » dans le Chœur de l'acte V de cette pièce, qui fut représentée entre mars et septembre 1599[73], date de l'expédition militaire du général d'Élisabeth en Irlande avant son échec et le piteux retour qui lui vaudra sa disgrâce :

> But now behold,
> In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
> How London doth pour out her citizens:
> The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort,
> Like to the senators of th'antique Rome
> With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
> Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in;
> As, by a lower but as loving likelihood,
> Were now the General of our gracious Empress,
> As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,
> Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,

> How many would the peaceful city quit
> To welcome him! (Chœur V, 22-34)

Ainsi Shakespeare pourrait-il bien utiliser à nouveau la mise en abyme pour signaler tout le bien qu'il pense d'Essex et tout le profit qu'il tire de la lecture de son traité militaire sur cette même « discipline de la guerre » que son Fluellen s'évertue à faire régner sur le champ de bataille d'Azincourt. La pièce *Henry V* serait-elle, dès lors, une œuvre hagiographique, voire idéologique, à l'arrière-plan de laquelle se dessinerait une possible prise de position de la part de Shakespeare en faveur du général Essex ? Jonathan Bate suggérait déjà que le dramaturge pouvait être un partisan d'Essex :

> Regardless of Shakespeare's semiconcealed political intentions in making the allusion—one gets the sense that he is only somewhere a little over halfway to being an Essex man—it is easy to see how the two remarkably similar passages in *Richard II* and *Henry V* could have been perceived as pro-Essex[74].

Faire théâtre des traités militaires et notamment des préceptes édictés par le comte d'Essex n'ajouterait-il pas encore à l'enthousiasme idéologique latent accompagnant l'espoir de son retour triomphal ? Rendre visibles et visuels sur la scène shakespearienne des références venues du manuel d'Essex ne suggèrerait-il pas que le dramaturge sert aussi ses visées idéologiques ?

Conclusion

Shakespeare, en maniériste, emprunte à toutes sortes de modèles de créations antérieures, en se moquant de cette « manière de faire ». Il pourrait donc tout aussi bien s'amuser à se mettre en scène dans le personnage de Fluellen afin d'avouer ses emprunts évidents à toutes sortes de manuels[75]. Les maniéristes usent à l'envi de la citation, de l'emprunt, non par un respect stérile, mais souvent au contraire, par goût du jeu, de l'ironie, sinon de la parodie, avec la désinvolture qui les caractérise : la notion même d'*imitation* est « la base, explicitement, revendiquée de la création maniériste[76] » redira Claude-Gilbert Dubois à plaisir. C'est d'ailleurs, pour Gisèle Venet, ce qui fait le « génie de Shakespeare » — titre qu'elle emprunte à son tour à Jonathan Bate[77] et choisit de conserver non sans raison :

> S'il est en effet une partie saisissable du génie de Shakespeare, ce pourrait bien être sa promptitude à s'emparer des courants épars et des modes imaginaires ambiants, selon cette culture de l'emprunt qui n'est pas seulement la sienne mais aussi celle de ses contemporains partout en Europe. Sa facilité à se saisir des codes les plus traditionnels comme des « manières » les plus volatiles fait de chacune de ses œuvres un florilège de ce que pouvaient être les conventions créatrices du moment, soit qu'il les exhibe sous des modes parodiques, avec une perspicacité jubilatoire, soit qu'il les détourne plus subrepticement de leurs fonctions initiales pour en dériver son propre « art poétique », subtilement recomposé à partir d'un héritage de genres et de styles poétiques mis à l'envers ou mis en pièces[78].

Dans les *Essais*, Montaigne disait déjà de lui-même, dans un moment d'auto-critique amusée, comme Fluellen-Shakespeare, qu'il était en quelque sorte emprunteur de toutes mains. De fait, il a fondé sa créativité sur l'art de la réécriture :

> Les abeilles pillotent deçà delà les fleurs, mais elles en font après le miel, qui est tout leur, ce n'est plus ni thym ni marjolaine : ainsi les pièces empruntées à autrui, [l'auteur] les transformera et les fondra ensemble, pour en faire un ouvrage tout à lui : à savoir son jugement. Son institution, son travail et son étude ne vise qu'à le former[79].

Tout processus de création maniériste possède ainsi ce goût de miel et le parfum entêtant des textes empruntés. Dans *La Renaissance maniériste*, Daniel Arasse définit à son tour le « maniérisme » comme un « art de l'art » qui manifeste toujours une attention particulière à la « technique de travail », sinon à la méthode suivie pour produire une œuvre :

> Non seulement [cette définition] rend compte de l'effet de distanciation qu'exercent les œuvres maniéristes, mais elle laisse entendre qu'au cœur de la pratique *di maniera*, c'est la relation de l'art à sa propre technique qui devient l'objet d'une attention artistique particulière[80].

Dans *Henry V*, Shakespeare ironise donc sur sa manière de faire théâtre des préceptes édictés par Dudley et Essex. Ainsi peut-on s'autoriser à lire la pièce comme un traité militaire retranscrit sous forme dramatique, mis en scène sous tous ses angles — les techniques de fortifications, la discipline dans les rangs, la punition des indociles ou des traîtres, voire l'exécution des prisonniers selon le bon vouloir du roi — mais le tout retranscrit à la « manière » shakespearienne, sans dogmatisme pour autant, par le biais de ses emprunts à plusieurs manuels pour offrir sa leçon sur la discipline militaire.

Une question plus sérieuse se pose, malgré tout, par-delà les choix esthétiques de l'écriture shakespearienne : s'agirait-il en plus, sous couvert d'écriture ludique, d'un manifeste politique chargé de rendre visible sur une scène de théâtre la plupart des préceptes édictés par le comte d'Essex, où l'on verrait Shakespeare, si précautionneux d'ordinaire, sortir de sa prudence habituelle pour célébrer ouvertement le retour du général victorieux qu'Essex finalement ne fut pas ? Faut-il, dès lors, voir dans la pièce *Henry V* une œuvre potentiellement hagiographique ? Ou déjà marquée par quelque engagement idéologique dont on sait, après la défaite du général, à quelle censure politique elle fut soumise — le Prologue et les Chœurs furent tronqués dans toutes les éditions après 1599, avant d'être rétablis dans l'édition posthume de 1623 ? Se pourrait-il qu'à ce moment de son œuvre, Shakespeare fasse se réincarner sur une scène une œuvre de papier dans une création dramatique pour s'impliquer dans la sphère du politique ? Esthétique et politique auraient-elles toujours eu ainsi partie liée ?

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Notes

[1] La source première de Shakespeare pour la dramatisation de la bataille d'Azincourt est la deuxième édition des « chroniques » de Raphael Holinshed. Voir Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, tome III, Londres, imprimé par Henry Denham,1587, p. 543-573.

[2] Toutes les références sont tirées de William Shakespeare*, Henry V*, éd. Gisèle Venet, trad. Jean-Michel Déprats, Paris, Folio théâtre, 1999. Le texte anglais utilisé dans cette édition bilingue a été établi par Line Cottegnies et Gisèle Venet.

[3] Paul A. Jorgensen, *Shakespeare's Military World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973, p. 73-74.

[4] Les principales batailles nationales représentées dans Shakespeare sont les batailles de Saint Albans (1455) et la sanguinaire bataille de Towton (1461), que l'on retrouve dans *2* et *3 Henry VI* (c. 1591-1592), la bataille de Castillon (1453) menée par John Talbot dans *1 Henry VI* (c. 1590), et la bataille de Shrewsbury (1403) dans *1 Henry IV* (c. 1596-1599), pour ne rien dire de la mythique bataille de Bosworth représentée dans *Richard III*.

[5] À ce sujet, voir Gisèle Venet, « 'Ce n'est plus thym ny marjolaine' *As You Like It, ou l'atelier de la réécriture* », Paris, *Études Anglaises*, 2016, p. 387-409.

[6] Nicholas de Somogyi, *Shakespeare's Theatre of War*, Londres et New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 54-89.

[7] Charles Edelman, *Shakespeare's Military Language: A Dictionary*, Londres, Athlone Press, 2000, p. 113.

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[9] Mark Netzloff, *Agents Beyond the State*: *The Writings of English Travelers, Soldiers, and Diplomats in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 139.

[10] Barnabe Riche, *Allarme to England Foreshowing what Perilles are Procured, where the People Liue Without Regarde of Martial Lawe. With a Short Discourse Conteyning the Decay of Warlike Discipline, Conuenient to be Perused by Gentlemen, such as are Desirous by Seruice, to Seeke their Owne Deserued Prayse, and the Preseruation of their Countrey,* Londres, imprimé par Henrie Middleton pour C. Barker, 1587.

[11] *Ibid.*, sig. [A1^{r}].

[12] Mark Netzloff, *Agents Beyond the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

[13] Anonyme, *A Larum for London or the Siedge of Antwerp*, Londres, imprimé par Edward Allde pour William Ferbrand, 1602.

[14] Barnabe Riche, *op. cit.*, sig. [F1^{r}].

[15] À ce sujet, voir R. Malcolm Smuts, *Political Culture, the State, and the problem of Religious War in Britain and Ireland, 1578-1625*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

[16] Voir Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[17] Robert Dudley, *Lawes and Ordinances, set downe by Robert Earle of Leycester, the Queenes Maiesties Lieutenant and Captaine General of her Armie and Forces in the Lowe Countries: Meete and fit to be obserued by all such as shall serue her Maiestie vnder him in the said Countries, and therefore to be published and notified to the whole Armie*, Londres, imprimé par Christopher Barker, 1586, sig. [A2^{r}-A2^{v}].

[18] *Ibid*., sig. [A1^{r}].

[19] Barnabe Riche, *A Path-Way to Military Practise*, Londres, imprimé par John Charlewood pour Robert Walley, 1587, sig. [A5^{r}].

[20] Albert Feuillerat, *The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, « Correspondence to Robert Sidney (XLII) », Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1923, p. 131-132.

[21] James Purlilia, *The Preceptes of Warre, setforth by James the Erle of Purlilia, and translated into Englysh by Peter Betham*, Londres, imprimé par Edwarde Whytchurche, 1544, sig. [B2^{r}].

[22] George Whetstone, *The Honorable Reputation of a Souldier, with a Morall Report of the Vertues, Offices, and (by abuse) the Disgrace of the Profession*, Londres, imprimé par Richard Jones, 1585, sig. [F1^{r}].

[23] Sir Roger Williams, *A Briefe Discourse of Warre. Written by Sir Roger Williams Knight, with his Opinion concerning some parts of the Martiall Discipline*, Londres, imprimé par Thomas Orwin, 1590.

[24] *Ibid.*, sig. [B4^{r}].

[25] *Ibid.*, sig. [A3^{r}].

[26] *Ibid.*, sig. [A2^{r}].

[27] Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, New York, St Martin's Press, 2000, p. 25-28.

[28] Robert Devereux, *Lawes and Orders of Warre Established for the Good Conduct of the Service in Ireland*, Londres, imprimé par Christopher Barker, 1599?.

[29] *Ibid.*, sig. [A1^{v}].

[30] *Ibid.*, sig. [B1^{v}].

[31] Le graveur hollandais Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617), exact contemporain de Shakespeare et maître reconnu du Maniérisme en gravure dans l'Europe du Nord, illustre en 1586 le brillant « triomphe » qui fut organisé à La Haye, avec plusieurs arcs érigés en l'honneur d'une visite prestigieuse, celle du général d'Élisabeth I^{re}, Robert Dudley. Goltzius est ainsi très probablement patenté à la cour d'Angleterre. Dans *The Compleat Gentleman*, on trouve, incidemment, un éloge fait par Henry Peacham (1576-1643) de l'art de Goltzius, dont les estampes peuvent être consultées à « Pope's Head Alley » à Londres, relève-t-il, preuve irréfutable que toutes les gravures avaient circulé à l'époque élisabéthaine en Angleterre et que Shakespeare pouvait y avoir eu accès : « For a bold touch, varietie of posture, curious and true shaddow : imitate Goltzius, his printes are commonly to be had in Popes head alley. Himselfe was luing at my last being in the low Countries at Harleem […] ». À ce sujet, voir Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman*, Londres, imprimé par John Legat, 1634, sig. [P4^{v}].

[32] Dong Ha Seo, *Military Culture of Shakespeare's England*, Birmingham, Birmingham University Press, 2011, p. 30.

[33] Nicholas Machiavell, *The Arte of Warre, written first in Italian by Nicholas Machiavell, and set for the in Englishe by Peter Whitehorne*, Londres, imprimé par John Kingston pour Niclas Inglande, 1562.

[34] William Garrard, *The Arte of Warre: Beeing the Onely Rare Book of Myllitarie Profession: drawne out of all our Late and Forraine Seruices*, Londres, imprimé par John Charlewood et William Howe, 1591, sig [A1^{r}].

[35] Paul A. Jorgensen, *Shakespeare's Military World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973, p. 71.

[36] James Purlilia, *The Preceptes of Warre, setforth by James the Erle of Purlilia, and translated into Englysh by Peter Betham*, *op. cit.*

[37] Paul A. Jorgensen, *Shakespeare's Military World*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[38] James Purlilia, *op. cit.*, sig. [B7^{v}].

[39] John Smythe, *Certain discourses, vvritten by Sir Iohn Smythe, Knight: concerning the formes and effects of diuers sorts of weapons, and other verie important matters militarie, greatlie mistaken by diuers of our men of warre in these daies*, Londres, imprimé par Thomas Orwin pour Richard Johnes, 1590, sig. [A2^{r}].

[40] William Garrard, *The Arte of Warre: Beeing the Onely Rare Book of Mylllitarie Profession: drawne out of all our Late and Forraine Seruices*, *op. cit.*, sig. [P2^{r}].

[41] Nicholas Machiavell, *The Arte of Warre, written first in Italian by Nicholas Machiavell, and set for the in Englishe by Peter Whitehorne*, *op.cit.*, sig. [B2^{v}].

[42] Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation made by Sea or Over-land […]*, Londres, imprimé par George Bishop, Ralph Newberie et Robert Barker, 1599.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[44] Tito Livio Frulovisi, *The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth* [c. 1437-1438], Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1911, p. 38.

[45] Robert Dudley*, Lawes and Ordinances Militarie sett downe and established by the Right Excellente Robert Earle of Leycester […]*, Leyde, imprimé par Andries Verschout, 1586.

[46] *Ibid.*, sig. [A3^{v}].

[47] Anonyme, *A Larum for London or the Siedge of Antwerp*, *op. cit.*, sig. [E2^{r}-E3^{v}].

[48] Thomas Styward, *The Pathwaie to Martiall Discipline […]*, Londres, 1582, sig. [H4^{r}].

[49] George Whetstone, *The Honorable Reputation of a Souldier, with a Morall Report of the Vertues, Offices, and (by abuse) the Disgrace of the Profession*, *op. cit.*, sig. [D2^{v}].

[50] Robert Devereux, *Lawes and Ordinances of Warre established for the Better Conduct of the Army by His Excellency the Early of Essex […]*, Londres, imprimé par John Partridge et John Rothwell, 1642, sig. [B2^{r}].

[51] Robert Dudley, *Lawes and Ordinances, set downe by Robert Earle of Leycester, the Queenes Maiesties Lieutenant and Captaine General of her armie and forces in the Lowe Countries: Meete and fit to be obserued by all such as shall serue her Maiestie vnder him in the said Countries, and therefore to be published and notified to the whole Armie*, *op. cit.*, sig. [A3^{r}-A3^{v}].

[52] *Ibid.*, sig. [A2^{r}].

[53] Cet épisode est emprunté directement aux sources de Shakespeare. Voir Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of Scotland, England*, *op. cit.*, p. 548 : « When king Henrie had fullie furnished his navi with men, munition & other prouisions, perceiuing that his capteines misliked nothing so much as delaie, determined his souldiers to go a ship-boord and awaie. But see the hap, the night before the daie appointed for their departure, he was credibilie informed, that Richard earle of Cambridge brother to Edward duke of Yorke, and Henrie lord Scroope of Masham

lord treasurer, with Thomas Graie a knight of Northumberland, being confederat together, had conspired his death: wherefore he caused them to be apprehended. […] These prisoners vpon examination, confessed, that for a great summe of monie which they had received of the French king, they intended to haue deliuered the king aliue into the hands of his enimies, or else to haue murthered him before he should arriue in the duchie of Normandie. […] Having thus conspired the death and destruction of me, which am the head of the realme and gouernour of the people […] I am by office to cause example to be showed […]. And so immediatlie they were had to execution ».

[54] Robert Dudley, *Lawes and Ordinances Militarie sett downe and established by the Right Excellente Robert Earle of Leycester […]*, Leyde, *op. cit.*, sig. [B3^{r}].

[55] Voir « Agincourt: Prisoners of War, Reprisals, and Necessity » *in* Theodor Meron, *Henry's Wars and Shakespeare's Laws: Perspectives on the Law of War in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 154-171 ; « Crimes and Accountability in Shakespeare », *in* Theodor Meron, *War Crimes Law Comes of Age: Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 67-121.

[56] Robert Devereux, *Lawes and Ordinances of Warre established for the Better Conduct of the Army by His Excellency the Early of Essex […]*, *op. cit.*, sig. [C2^{v}].

[57] Cet épisode est par ailleurs directement emprunté des sources historiques de Shakespeare. Voir Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 554 : « But when the outcrie of the lackies and boies, which ran awaie for feare of the Frenchmen thus spoiling the campe, came to the kings eares, he doubting least his enimies should gather togither againe and begin a new field; and mistrusting further that the prisoners would be an aid to his enimies, or the verie enimies to their takers in déed if they were suffered to liue, contrarie to his accustomed gentlenes, commanded by sound of trumpet, that euerie man (vpon paine of death) should incontinentlie slaie his prisoner. When this dolorous decree, and pitifull proclamation was pronounced, pitie it was to sée how some Frenchmen were suddenlie sticked with daggers, some were brained with pollaxes, some slaine with malls, other had their throats cut, and some their bellies panched, so that in effect, hauing respect to the great number, few prisoners were saued ».

[58] Robert Dudley, *Lawes and Ordinances Militarie sett downe and established by the Right Excellente Robert Earle of Leycester […]*, Leyde, imprimé par Andries Verschout, 1586, sig. [B3^{r}].

[59] William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, éd. David Scott Kastan, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), Londres, Bloomsbury, 2002.

[60] Holinshed introduit une confusion entre deux personnages historiques portant le nom de Mortimer. Historiquement, alors que l'un est le fils de Roger Mortimer, désigné par Richard II pour lui succéder, l'autre est l'oncle paternel et le beau-frère de Hotspur. Or, c'est ce dernier qui est fait prisonnier par Glendower. En raison de cette erreur, que Shakespeare reproduira lui-aussi à son tour, Holinshed impute à Henry IV, « infâme politique » — « this vile politician » (I.3.239) —, de sombres desseins pour maintenir prisonnier celui qu'il croit être l'héritier de Richard II. On comprend dès lors pourquoi, dans les sources comme dans la pièce, le roi rechigne à l'idée de libérer celui qui pourrait le détrôner.

[61] Robert Dudley, *Lawes and Ordinances Militarie sett downe and established by the Right Excellente Robert Earle of Leycester […]*, Leyde, *op. cit.*, sig. [B1^{v}].

[62] Robert Devereux, *Lawes and Ordinances of Warre established for the Better Conduct of the Army by His Excellency the Early of Essex […]*, Londres, imprimé par John Partridge et John Rothwell, 1642.

[63] *Ibid.*, sig. [B2^{v}].

[64] William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part 3*, eds. John D. Cox & Eric Rasmussen, The Arden Shakespeare, (Third Series), Londres, Bloomsbury, 2001.

[65] C'est un moment glacial que Kenneth Branagh amplifiera dans son film en inventant une « anamnèse » transportant le spectateur au moyen d'un « flash-back » dans les souvenirs de la jeunesse débauchée d'Henry V, où l'on voit le prince Hal partager un moment de complicité avec Bardolph et ses compères qui font mine de l'étrangler par jeu, sinistre et mortifère anticipation de la scène de la pendaison.

[66] Robert Dudley*, Lawes and Ordinances Militarie sett downe and established by the Right Excellente Robert Earle of Leycester […]*, Leyde, imprimé par Andries Verschout, 1586, sig. [B1^{r}].

[67] Robert Devereux, *Lawes and Ordinances of Warre established for the Better Conduct of the Army by His Excellency the Early of Essex […]*, *op. cit.*, sig. [B2^{r}].

[68] *Ibid.*, sig. [C3^{r}].

[69] À ce sujet, voir Jeannette Kamp, Matthias van Rossum, *Desertion in the Early Modern World: A Comparative History*, Londres, Bloomsbury, 2016.

[70] George Koppelman, Daniel Wechsler (éds.), *Shakespeare's Beehive: An Annotated Elizabethan Dictionary Comes to Light*, New York, Axletree Press, 2015.

[71] Gisèle Venet, *Leçon littéraire sur Henry V de Shakespeare*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, p. 111.

[72] Voir Michelle Castelletti, « A Picture of Pageantry and the Arches of Triumph: dramatic, visual, and literary representations of James I and the new Stuart dynasty through Thomas Dekker's account of the 1604 Royal Entry and Stephen Harrison's design for its setting », in *VIDES*, vol. 6, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 90-112. Voir également John Delsinne, « Le triomphe de Robert Dudley à La Haye (1586) : la représentation graphique d'une 'scène de guerre' à l'issue incertaine ? », *Arrêt sur scène*, Montpellier, 2026, à paraître.

[73] « If the Chorus to Act V does indeed gesture towards Essex, then the play's first performance can be dated between March 1599 and the late summer of the same year, before hopes of a glorious victory were dashed by the earl's ignominious return », *in* Karen Britland & Line Cottegnies (éds.), *Henry V: A Critical Reader*, The Arden Shakespeare, Londres, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 10 ; *Henry V*, *op. cit.*, p. 381-382.

[74] Jonathan Bate, « Was Shakespeare an Essex Man? », *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 162, 2008, p. 18.

[75] À ce sujet, voir Gisèle Venet, « 'Ce n'est plus thym ny marjolaine' *As You Like It, ou l'atelier de la réécriture* », Paris, *Études Anglaises*, 2016, p. 387-409.

[76] Claude Gilbert-Dubois, *Le maniérisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1979, p. 11.

[77] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Londres, Picador, 1997.

[78] Gisèle Venet, « Shakespeare, maniériste et baroque ? », *XVII-XVIII. Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVII^e^ et XVIII^e^ siècles*, n°55, 2002, p. 11.

[79] Montaigne, *Essais*, éd. Bernard Cambeaux, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2019, p. 221.

[80] Daniel Arasse et Andreas Tönnesmann, *La Renaissance maniériste*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 13.

John Delsinne

John Delsinne est actuellement Attaché Temporaire d'Enseignement et de Recherche (ATER) à l'Université Sorbonne Nouvelle. Il est dans la phase finale de rédaction de sa thèse, intitulée « La représentation des batailles dans les *Henriades* de William Shakespeare », sous la direction de Line Cottegnies, à Sorbonne Université.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

“I love myself. I hate myself.” *Richard III*, dir. Evgeny Titov

Par Imke Lichterfeld
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Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus,
William Shakespeare: *Richard III*, dir. Evgeny Titov
Design: Etienne Pluss
Costumes: Esther Bialas
Sound: Moritz Wallmüller
Light: Konstantin Sonneson
Dramaturgy: Janine Ortiz

Cast
Richard: André Kaczmarczyk
Queen Elizabeth: Judith Rosmair
Queen Margaret: Friederike Wagner
Duchess of York: Manuela Alphons
Lady Anne et al.: Claudia Hübbecker
Hastings: Blanka Winkler
Rivers: Pauline Kästner
Edward IV: Jochen Moser / Hans Meyer-Rosenthal
Princess Elizabeth: Sae Hanajima
Prince Edward: Luke Dopheide
Prince Richard: Theodor Taprogge / Rafael Wohlleber

Premiere: 2 September 2023
Running time: 2 hours

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a history play about the rise and fall of the last Plantagenet king, the Yorkist Richard of Gloucester, the hunchbacked antihero. Shakespeare, following the Tudor historiography of his time, depicts him as an arch-villain. As the third son, Richard was never to hope for the crown. In the play, however, plotting the murder of his middle brother and his nephews and waiting for his sickly eldest brother's death, Richard, in the manner of a perfect stage-Machiavel, succeeds in gaining the crown—albeit for a short time only. Ultimately, he is defeated by the young Tudor hero Henry, Earl of Richmond, who will ascend to the throne of England as Henry VII, grandfather to the reigning monarch alive at Shakespeare's time, Queen Elizabeth I.

The play deals with intrigues and murders, ensnaring politics, and Richard's fascinating ruthlessness. The devious protagonist involves his audience by granting them insight into his machinations while never disguising his evil intentions; for these, he is punished in the final battle at Bosworth Field.

Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf stages Thomas Brasch's translation, originally intended for five female and thirty male actors, but reduced to two men, three children, and six women. There are essential cuts to this production. Moreover, the director introduces a clear opposition between the male protagonist and the female opposition. The stage is mostly well-lit, the setting is rather clinical; the space seems to be a vast industrial or grand building with security cameras. Later scenes are moved into wider rooms, including an impressive panoptical control room—this underlines the central theme of the play: who is in control? Who is in charge? Who is in power?

The play is canonical, the eponymous role often defining the climax of an actor's career. Lead actor André Kaczmarczyk (nominated for the German Theaterpreis Faust for this role) had been

directed by Kazakhstan-born Evgeny Titov before. In 2021, they collaborated on a stunning and nerve-wracking *Macbeth,* whose mind was infiltrated by spidery thoughts about power and ambition. In *Richard III,* Titov once more demonstrates how well he has permeated Shakespeare's themes and characters—and that he can reduce these to their essence. Currently, Titov is preparing a third Shakespeare, once more about the machinations of power: his *King Lear* will premiere in February 2025.

The staging is modern, and the adaptation is grotesque: Kaczmarczyk's Richard is a deformed yet agile creature. His face is distorted by a net over his head, making him physically repulsive; his feet are dressed with uneven, golden clubs. It looks challenging to walk with these feet, yet Richard seems well-practised—this detail underlines that he can supposedly deal with the deformity. He is ugly on the outside and the inside; as the play demands, he is 'determined' to be a villain. The costume is shiny and eclectic: there is and will be more gold reflecting his pompous status later in the show. In her contribution to the programme, dramaturgue Janine Ortiz quotes the band "Deutsch-Österreichisches Feingefühl"'s 1983 song "Codo" which contains the lyric "Ich bin so hässlich. Ich bin der Hass" translating to "I am so ugly. I am hate". Indeed, Titov's and Kaczmarczyk's clear understanding of Richard shines through: he is an ambitious narcissist in disguise. He is playing with an inferiority complex, haughtily uttering "I think I might be underestimating myself and my value". His eccentricity is often contrasted with the women who are dressed either in black or white, usually recalling early modern or Victorian dresses—or of different shades of red. His ancient foe, the former and aged Queen Margaret (Friederike Wagner), for example, dressed in purple, does seem to be on par for a few glimpses: she impresses him with her haughty curses, if only for a moment.



1. Düsseldorf Schauspiel, *Richard III*, 2024, dir. Evgeny Titov.
Richard III (André Kaczmarczyk) and Queen Margaret (Friederike Wagner).
Crédits. Thomas Rabsch.

Richard is a misogynist par excellence: he plots while women are polishing his shoes. The deformed man wields power opposite supposedly "weak" women, inventively calling them moles, "Dreckfrack" [dirty suit], cucumbers, caricatures. He discards them as he pleases, as his short stint with the deceased Prince of Wales' widow, Lady Anne, demonstrates. He then moves onto more alienating territory and woos his young niece to absurdly "make amends" (IV.4.309)

for the loss of her brothers, claiming superficially "Say that I did all this for love of her" (IV.4.302), which sounds even more grotesque in Brasch's translation: "An allem war nur die Liebe Schuld"—penitence is non-existent, it is 'love's fault'. As the actor of his niece is a young girl, this feels nauseating. Yet, the women will have their hour. While he abuses women, they will later collaborate against him.

The only other male actors in this production portray his sickly brother Edward IV who soon dies in a bed with a dirty, bloody cloth in a corner of the stage in a palace with ramshackle walls, and the two young nephews, soon executed after being led off with a melodic nursery rhyme "We're going to the tower now!" Their influence is inane. All other male parts are cut including that of Richard's final adversary, the Earl of Richmond and later King Henry VII. Deleting his triumph allows the performance to completely focus on the downfall of the protagonist due to his own ruthless regime.

Kaczmarczyk certainly stands out as a disgusting male persona on stage. He provokes ridicule that turns to anguish, as when he licks his desired wife, Lady Anne's spit. At the same, a lacking self-confidence and possible PTSD are apparent. These, he compensates with a hypersexuality: This Richard often plays with his large genitals, which could be interpreted as underlining hypermasculinity. He is undoubtedly toxic. An impressive and shocking scene takes place when virtually naked Richard—goblin-like—watches himself reflected in a fivefold mirror, provoking disgust, fascination, and fear.



2. Düsseldorf Schauspiel, *Richard III*, 2024, dir. Evgeny Titov.
Richard III (André Kaczmarczyk).
Crédits. Thomas Rabsch.

Richard grotesquely claims to build a "house of friendship from this pile of hate-ridden broken glass". Funnily and fatefully enough, this will happen, but not under his command.

The performance might appear misogynistic at the beginning, but it is not. Apart from the royal women, Richard's supporter Hastings and the role of Rivers are cast with female actors. All—adversaries at the beginning—learn to collaborate in the course of this production. They grieve together—a fact that the setting formidably underlines when coffin after coffin is brought on stage. However, they also adhere to the idea of kalokagathia—normative stereotypes of outer corresponding to inner beauty—and despise the physically deformed Richard. This includes his

mother, the Duchess of York (Manuela Alphons), who collapses and claims her preference for death: "I to my grave" (IV.1.101). The women of York and Lancaster first call out their inimical blasphemies against each other; later they feel empathy and support each other against the tyrant. A fact that strikes here is the range of the female voices filling the stage—though only six, they become ubiquitous, their weakness and strength, their grief and anger fully apparent, at some point, all dressed in black, mourning together. The women bond when Queen Elizabeth, then widow of the deceased king and mother to the doomed princes, confirms: "Alas, I am the mother of these griefs" (II.2.82) Friendship, or at least community, is visibly forged between them throughout the evening. Thus, the performance underlines the role of women—as compatriots, sufferers, ghosts, agents of fortune, vengeance, and justice.

Because of the cuts of the final battle, the play does not end with the blessing of the young hero, a victory, and hope for the future of a Tudor monarchy. It ends after all the women—echoing the maledictions of the ghosts from the Shakespearean text—curse and stab Richard. All remain as witnesses of his reign but with bloody hands. Revenge for Richard's murders has been fulfilled.



3. Düsseldorf Schauspiel, *Richard III*, 2024, dir. Evgeny Titov.
Richard III (André Kaczmarczyk) and Hastings (Blanka Winkler).
Crédits. Thomas Rabsch.

At the end of the production, the dying king is left all alone on stage. The scene is absurdly funny, satisfactory, and yet pitiful: "Is there a murderer here", he questions. "No. Yes, I am" (V.3.196). Full of doubt, this Richard dutifully utters the lines "I love myself" and cuts the "rather" in "I […] hate myself." Alone, he calls for a horse and dies.

Düsseldorf presents an exquisite adaptation of Shakespeare's famous play: compelling, disturbing, and feminist. It leaves the audience with a bitter taste of warfare and gender awareness, portrayed via preposterous and defiant scenes.

Imke Lichterfeld

Dr. Imke Lichterfeld teaches English Literature at the University of Bonn in Germany, where she has a position as Studies Coordinator at the Department of English, American and Celtic Studies. She has contributed to publications on the English Renaissance (e.g. in *Arrêt sur Scene* or *Comparative Drama*), Modernism (*Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*), and contemporary literature (*Inklings Jahrbuch*), and she has published a monograph on early modern drama called *When the Bad Bleeds — Mantic Elements in English Renaissance Revenge Tragedy* with V&R unipress in 2010. Most recent articles include "Champ de blé aux corbeaux: The Tragedy of Macbeth (2021) by Joel Coen", co-written with Sabina Laskowska-Hinz in *Utpictura 18* and "Contested Kingship — Controversial Coronation: York's Paper Crown" in the volume *The Moment of Death in Early Modern Europe, c. 1450-1800* (eds. Christ/Brunner). Apart from twentieth-century literature on water, her current research predominantly focuses on contemporary practices and adaptations of early modern theatre, Shakespeare, and his contemporaries.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Romeo @ Juliet, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi: “Have you ever watched *Romeo and Juliet* with a helmet on?”

“Ivan Franko” National Academic Drama Theatre, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine

Par Yuliia Shchukina et Liudmyla Vaniuha
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Romeo @ Juliet, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi
New translation by Yurii Andruhovych
Reading from the Revelation of John the Theologian, Apocalypse

Cast
Romeo Montecchi: Oleh Panas
Juliet Capulet: Inna Bevza
Brother Lorenzo: Oleksii Hnatkovskyi
Juliet's Nurse: Olha Komanovska
Senior Montecchi, Romeo's Father: Ihor Zakharchuk
Signora Capulet, Juliet's mother: Myroslava Polataiko, Tetiana Hirnyk
Senior Capulet, Juliet's Father: Yurii Khvostenko
Paris: Andrii Melnyk
Tybalt, Juliet's Cousin: Yurii Vykhovanets
Mercutio, Romeo's friend: Ivan Blindar
Erynia: Halyna Barankevych, Mariia Stopnyk
Erynia: Nadiia Levchenko
Erynia: Olesia Pasichniak
Monks: Viktor Abramiuk, Vladyslav Demydiuk, Oleh Derkach, Bohdan Romaniuk, Ostap Sloboda, Mykola Slyvchuk

Creative team
Composers: Roman Hryhoriv, Illia Razumeiko
Scenography, costumes: Yuliia Zaulychna
Choreography: Olha Semioshkina
Assistant directors: Andrii Felyk, Liubov Skirko

Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, a Ukrainian National Prize winner and the current director of "Ivan Franko" Drama Theatre situated in Ivano-Frankivsk, West Ukraine, is known for his non-canonical approach to the classics. He has boldly experimented on the acting spaces for his two Shakespeare projects. In 2017, his *Hamlet*, conceived as a "neo-horror opera", which won the Ukraine Festival Award, was performed in the basement of the theatre and was subsequently taken to the ruins of Pniv Castle, in the Cis-Carpathian region.

At the beginning of 2021, Derzhypilskyi presented the second part of his Shakespeare duology, *Romeo and Juliet*, which he performed in three distinct locations within the town of Ivano Frankivsk: PromPrylad, a dilapidated industrial plant in the process of being renovated; a progression through the city streets; the basement of the theatre. Spectators and performers had to move from one to the next venue, modelled after a concept of street theatre that, according to Derzhypilskyi, was current during Shakespeare's time and that he wanted to update.

Gathered near the industrial plant before the performance, the spectators received instructions on industrial safety, were asked to put on a construction helmet, and were given maps with the routes they would have to follow around the city to get to the performance venues.

Before the spectators were led into the machine shop of the industrial plant, they could see the actors playing the main characters standing above in the watch tower, as if checking the start of a work shift. An order was heard (was it from the foreman, the director, God?), "Begin", and the huge doors slowly opened with a loud creak. Now the spectators were conditioned to enter a

"post-apocalyptic" space; they had the key to understand, in modern terms, the cruelty of the world in which Romeo and Juliet met and fell in love. Inside, the volume of the neo-Gothic music (the musical concept of the performance was developed by Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumeiko, composers of Kyiv) was deafening. As a counterpoint, Juliet rushed forward to sing an aria from Haendel's opera *Rinaldo*, a baroque piece in which true love prevails after war, magic, and deceit. From the start, through the use of contrasted music, Derzhypilskyi aimed at showing "the collision of spirituality, of heavenly faith and love" of the young couple in a hostile, brutal world.

In this huge non-theatrical space, the spectators had to move to the several locations used as playing areas to watch the play in action.



1. Mercutio (Ivan Blindar) in the centre of the acting area.
Crédits. All photographs were provided by the Press Service of "Ivan Franko" National Drama Theatre, Ivano-Frankivsk.

The performers took advantage of this industrial setting in the acting of their parts. Brother Lorenzo (Oleksii Hnatkovskyi) used the factory rails in a very clever way, especially during the liturgy of Romeo and Juliet's wedding when he moved the throne along the rails.



2. Romeo (Oleh Panas) and Juliet's (Inna Bevza) Wedding Ceremony.

In his exchange with Romeo (Oleh Panas), Brother Lorenzo was set against the huge doors representing his monastic cell, signalling the disproportion of the material and spiritual principles in Verona.

Acting areas were not only on the ground, but also high above, forcing the spectators to quickly adjust their eyes to a new spot where loud noises came from, for instance the basket-like platforms of a crane in which the Capulets were gathered, swinging in the air.

Another spot represented an elite sports club where Romeo confronted his father or when the young men of both houses could alternatively enjoy physical training. A punching bag hanging from an overhead traveling crane moved forward and backward with much noise, a sauna bath fully equipped with a steamy device where naked young men could be seen through the glass walls, exuding strength and self-confidence.

The fight between Mercutio (Ivan Blindar) and Tybalt (Yurii Vykhovanets), the central event of this first part, took place in a massive cage walled on three sides with mesh wire.



3. Mercutio (Ivan Blindar) and Tybalt (Yurii Vykhovanets) fight in the cage.

The bodies of the opponents made a terrible noise when hitting the floor made of a wooded base covered with tatami mats. Tybalt's athletic wear bore the inscription "Bad Boy", fashionista Mercutio sported expensive leather gloves. Under a suggestive lighting, the spectators saw the intertwined athletic bodies of the actors, mixing their fake blood, smelling of male sweat, and hearing their accelerated heartbeat. This false and genuine hand-to-hand combat was accompanied by the frantic tempo of Balkan-style music. On all sides of this ring the spectators witnessed this very violent, acrobatic wrestling, turning into the adrenaline-fuelled supporters of the Montagues and Capulets in Medieval Verona.

The first part of the performance ended on the death of Mercutio and Tybalt, reunited in death.



4. Musicians in the hearse truck.

In lieu of interval, the performance featured a funeral procession through the city streets (in coordination with the City Council), behind the truck carrying the two bodies. With lamps in their hands and to the sound of live music, the crowds of spectators slowly departed in a mourning column led by some actors dressed as Franciscan monks.



5. Funeral Procession in the centre of Ivano-Frankivsk.

The second part took place in the basement of the theatre, divided into several sectors. The closest one, the Hall of Divine Justice, was blocked by an iron mesh, echoing the fighting ring, and recalled the causes of the forced separation of the newlyweds. Romeo and Juliet were isolated from each other, unable to get together again, like lonely birds in cages. To the right was a platform with a tower where, alternately, Romeo then Juliet seemed to freeze like the statues on pedestals of some lovers buried alive. From time to time, their silent presence there, above the ground, transcending suffering, acted as a distancing symbol (the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt). Brother Lorenzo had changed into the figure of a respectable lawyer in a modern suit, commenting on the tragedy of the young couple. He looked like a Supreme Judge, or some kind of priest in a pagan temple, with the brazier next to him.

Originally set up for *Hamlet*, this makeshift auditorium deliberately echoed Shakespeare's Globe Memorial Theatre. Several layers of massive pipes from the heating system shone brightly over the heads of the spectators, blocking the view, so a large screen had been erected there to allow them to follow the full extent of the stage action.

Derzhypilskyi rethought in a post-modernist way, the duality of a play set in Medieval Verona against present-day society. Timeless innocence was confronted to Gothic culture, the modern version of ruthless violence. While watching this immersive performance the spectators did not feel like the outside observers of the plot but lived a powerful experience when participating in the crowd scenes, sharing with the secondary characters in the responsibility of causing harm to innocent lovers, with a mixed impression of pain and repentance. This dark, disturbing version of the play was in keeping with the violence of modern times.

The premiere of the play *Romeo @ Juliet* took place in February 2021, when Ukrainian society had already had a year of quarantine experience due to the outbreak of the COVID-2019 pandemic. The plague of Renaissance Verona acquired an ominous and specific relevance for the actors and audiences of the play at Frankivsk Theatre. When watching the play, the audience of Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi's Theatre often wore not only protective helmets, but also medical face masks.

Since the city of Ivano-Frankivsk is located on the western edge of Ukraine, the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war that began a year after the premiere of *Romeo @ Juliet* did not affect it. Already on International Theatre Day 2022, Frankivsk Drama Theatre resumed showing performances for spectators-displaced persons. So, the performance has not stopped being shown in the repertoire for a long time. For three and a half years from the premiere, this play has been performed for spectators on average once every two months.

As the last play of the 30th Shakespeare Festival in Craiova (Romania) in May 2024, the performance made a powerful impression on the spectators. There were many changes due to the full war raging in the country: the Capulet family emerged from survival blankets, their provisional camp being littered with empty bottles, and Lady Capulet, obviously drunk, offered drinks to some members of the audience; Brother Lorenzo featured a junkie suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, preparing a coke dose for himself as Romeo was walking towards him; all clad in white, Romeo and Juliet were the innocent victims of the violence of their elders. That is a weighty conclusion indeed.

Yuliia Shchukina

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Romeo and Juliet au Globe, printemps 2024 : acrobatique et virevoltant

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, 19 Mars-13 Avril 2024

Par Nathalie Robert-Jurado
Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

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Production
Metteur en scène : Lucy Cuthberston (Globe's Director of Education)
Ensemble : Sarah Agha, Joshua John
Costumes et décor : Natalie Pryce
Photographies : Nathalie Robert-Jurado

Comédiens
Lady Montague : Mariéme Diouf
Romeo : Hayden Mampasi
Friar Lawrence : Marieme Diouf
Benvolio : Saroja-Lily Ratnavel
Lady Capulet : Sharon Ballard
Capulet : Gethin Alderman
La Nourrice : Miriam Grace Edwards
Juliet : Felixe Forde
Mercutio : Ashley Byam
Paris : Simeon Desvignes
Tybalt : Liam King

Participation
Le Cycliste : Owen Gawthorpe
Musicien Percussions : Rosie Bergonzi et Zands Duggan, Dave Price
Directeur associé : Kevin Bennett
Directeur de casting : Nick Hockaday
Co-Composer : Ben Hales et Dave Price
Directeur de combat : Kevin McCurdy
Voix : Tess Dignan

I. Le projet pédagogique et culturel de Lucy Cuthbertson

En mars 2024, le Théâtre du Globe accueillait à Londres une nouvelle mise en scène de *Romeo et Juliet* dirigée par Lucy Cuthbertson, directrice du Département pour l'Éducation au Globe[1]. Ce spectacle adapté pour un public jeune de 11-16 ans est une version condensée en quatre-vingt-dix minutes, où des comédiens circulent en vélo tout terrain, naviguent entre les différents lieux sur une scène qui se veut urbaine et dynamique. La pièce vise non seulement à soutenir le programme scolaire, mais aussi à aborder la question de la lutte contre la criminalité. Pour ce faire, les acteurs et l'équipe ont travaillé avec l'unité de la « Violence Reduction Unit » (VRU) de Sadiq Khan[2]. Toutefois, « [l]a mission n'est pas simplement d'éduquer, mais de divertir[3] ». Lucy Cuthbertson souhaite que le public scolaire passe le meilleur moment possible : « where they've fallen in love with the Globe, loved the production, understood it, and, somewhere in their minds, it's resonating that it's Shakespeare. They've loved this thing that is Shakespeare and see that those two things don't have to be mutually exclusive[4] ».

II. Un décor pour plaire à la jeune génération

Entre tradition et contemporanéité, la troupe s'installe et propose une version propre au XXI[e] siècle, colorée, qui file à vive allure. Le décor est planté : d'immenses fresques de graffiti décorent les palissades en bois. Le public entre, prend place et découvre les portraits revisités des personnages clefs : Romeo et Juliet, nouvelle génération.



1. Graffiti dans l'espace des galeries du public.
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

Les personnages sont peints à la bombe et préfigurent la mise en scène virevoltante, alors que Lucy Cuthbertson place Vérone dans un univers aussi moderne qu'inquiétant, une Vérone aux quartiers défavorisés, dominés par des gangs et submergés par la violence. Des graffitis ont été ajoutés aux piliers de marbre et aux galeries. Des pancartes colorées et écrites avec des lettres au format grossi sont accrochées aux façades des balcons donnant sur la cour, avec des mots comme « Sorrow », « Death », « Hatred », peints à côté de tags de gangs plus simples indiquant « Mon », pour « Montague », et « Cap », pour « Capulet ».



2 & 3. Graffitis accrochés aux balcons.
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

Trois ouvertures se distinguent dans le mur du fond, par lesquelles les personnages peuvent entrer et sortir : deux arcades à gauche et à droite, et au centre, une grande paire de portes lambrissées en bois. Entre celles-ci, les murs sont couverts d'autres graffiti, certains rendant hommage aux morts (l'un indique « Too Soon Married », un autre, « Oppressed »). Une boîte en métal, comme on en trouve dans la rue, contenant des câbles électriques, se dresse devant elle à gauche, couverte de graffiti elle aussi. Quelques bougies blanches y sont posées. Pour finir, le

mur du fond est haut de deux étages, et au sommet se trouve une galerie où des musiciens, vêtus de survêtements modernes comme le reste de la troupe, vont jouer tout au long de la pièce.



4. Espace dédié aux musiciens et pancartes colorées.
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

L'Acte I débute. La violence entre les Montague et les Capulet fait rage. Sur scène, les sans-abris se blottissent autour des poêles pour se réchauffer. Un cycliste menaçant et masqué, vêtu de noir, parcourt les rues avec dextérité, interrompant périodiquement ses figures techniques pour se précipiter et voler les téléphones des passants sans méfiance. À d'autres moments, il apparaît dans la cour, où se trouve une plateforme rectangulaire légèrement surélevée. Des garde-corps métalliques d'un mètre de haut longent les deux côtés les plus longs, les séparant des fondations, pour créer une allée ouverte. Des lignes jaunes doubles s'étendent sur environ deux mètres, le long du sol des deux côtés, avec les mots « KEEP CLEAR » en guise d'avertissement, car c'est le « skate-park » urbain du gang. Sur la plateforme se trouvent trois blocs de béton, deux petits de chaque côté d'un grand bloc central, chacun recouvert de graffiti supplémentaires. De temps à autres, le cycliste traverse l'espace du public pour sauter de bloc en bloc, ou même sur les rampes sur une seule roue avec un contrôle total, parfois à quelques centimètres des coureurs au sol.



5. À gauche : bloc de béton ; à droite : espace de circulation du cycliste.
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

Les trafiquants de drogue vendent des potions mortelles dans des sacs de livraison de nourriture « Mantua Eat ». Des fleurs, des ballons, un ours en peluche et des bougies jalonnent les sanctuaires où reposent les victimes de crimes au couteau. Le thème de la mort causée par la violence est, dès le début de l'Acte I, visuellement mis en scène par la présence de fleurs déposées au fond de la scène, comme pour rendre hommage aux disparus et se souvenir des

morts survenues par cette violence latente, image qui préfigure aussi de la fin tragique de la pièce.



6. Vue d'ensemble de l'espace scénique.
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

Mantua, à proximité, est identifiée par un panneau représentant le signe du métro de Londres. Le public peut ainsi faire le lien avec certains lieux de la capitale anglaise que la décoratrice et costumière Natalie Pryce avait en tête, et lire « *lives, not knives* » sur une pancarte improvisée, à côté d'une photo de l'une des personnes récemment décédées. La première impression qui se dégage : celle d'une Vérone ancrée dans le crime et dans la violence urbaine.

L'entrée des comédiens est percutante : ils se présentent baskets aux pieds, coiffés de casquettes, vêtus de vêtements de sport amples et de vestes qui donnent une allure décontractée et moderne. Ils sont issus de plus de treize origines différentes. La noblesse est remplacée par la hiérarchie de la rue, et les duels à l'épée sont transformés en rixes urbaines entre jeunes à capuches.





7 & 8. « Performer » de rue : Tybalt (Liam King).
Crédits. Nathalie Robert-Jurado.

Le cycliste professionnel débarque sur scène, il porte un masque qui lui couvre entièrement le visage et terrorise les personnages déjà présents par sa danse lugubre matérialisée par les figures diverses qu'il exécute autour d'eux.

III. Derrière la violence, l'espoir ?

Et cependant, même si un sentiment de violence imminente n'est jamais loin, l'espoir demeure. Le public découvre le bienveillant Frère Laurence (Mariéme Diouf) qui gère une banque alimentaire de la communauté locale du centre pour jeunes (« Youth Club ») et qui encourage les jeunes à occuper leur temps dans une ferme de la ville. Même si ses répliques sont coupées pour les bienfaits de la version courte, il reste un personnage emblématique qui favorise les liens, grâce à son rôle d'éducateur, avec le jeune public présent. Ce dernier semble apprécier cette interprétation du Frère Laurence, ainsi que les décors, les représentations contemporaines et les références à un quotidien familier pour certains. Quand la scène se situe au club pour jeunes, une pancarte descend du plafond, en forme de crucifix, avec le nom « The Cell », illuminé en rose fluorescent. Frère Laurence est une femme noire avec des cheveux en tresses de perles jusqu'aux épaules ; son style n'est ni féminin, ni masculin : elle porte un jeans droit enroulé sur des bottes marron et une chemise noire. Un collier de chien de Vicaire est visible au niveau de son cou. Parfois, elle porte un pull en tricot rayé par-dessus, avec de nombreux badges soutenant les droits LGBTQ et d'autres causes épinglées sur la poitrine.

La nourrice (Miriam Grace Edwards) arrive à son tour (Acte I, scène 3) et se dévoile aussi comme un personnage proche du public jeune. Elle montre, par exemple, qu'elle aime les plats à emporter du « Burger King ». Elle pourra paraître une bonne confidente pour ce public qui valide sa présence auprès de l'adolescente Juliet. De plus, c'est une nourrice qui effectue plusieurs tâches : à la fois en tant que confidente de Juliet, mais aussi comme ambulancière en uniforme du « NHS » (« National Health Service »). C'est une femme blanche, avec des cheveux blonds aux reflets bruns. Elle porte une blouse verte ; l'insigne « NHS » est visible sur son pantalon. Parfois, elle revêt un duffel-coat, quand ce n'est pas une veste haute visibilité. Mais pour le bal de l'Acte I, elle porte aussi une tenue dorée — un haut court, à col licou, et un pantalon ample.

Les amoureux maudits se rencontrent (Acte I, scène 5) lors d'un bal aux allures de *rave party* savamment chorégraphié. La scène de la rencontre est écourtée pour les besoins de cette version de quatre-vingt-dix minutes, sans pourtant perdre en intensité : le premier baiser est bien plus long qu'un chaste baiser sur la joue.

Le public est ensuite, sans transition, plongé dans l'Acte II, ce qui met l'emphase sur l'action, et donne un coup d'accélérateur à la représentation. L'attention du public est à son paroxysme. Hayden Mampasi incarne un Romeo en survêtement Adidas. La plupart du temps, il porte un ensemble de sport noir aux rayures vertes, jaunes et rouges sur le côté. Pétillant et naïf, il semble passer une grande partie de son temps à rêver. Les cheveux rasés sur le côté, il frappe l'air et salue ses amis lorsqu'il rencontre la fille de ses rêves. Mais sa personnalité trahit un profond manque de confiance. En effet, Romeo doit se tourner vers le public pour obtenir un soutien moral avant de clamer son texte depuis le balcon. Il déglutit et renifle sans arrêt, comme un enfant. Le personnage de Juliet, incarné par Felixe Forde, paraît bien plus sérieux et plus mature. Juliet est une fille noire, brillante et enthousiaste, avec une abondance de boucles noires montées en chignon sur la tête. Elle porte un pull et un bas de survêtement assortis, dans un tissu beige uni et doux, sur des baskets blanches ; elle enfile parfois un gilet noir. Pour la fête, elle porte une petite robe à paillettes dorées, avec des collants pâles et des chaussures plates couleur chair. Parfois, on aperçoit l'intérieur de sa chambre, suggéré par un cadre de lit en métal et surmonté de housses de couette lilas.

Inévitablement, les coupures drastiques dans les répliques de Romeo ne permettent pas de conserver les subtilités de la scène du balcon, mais cela ne semble pas affecter la portée de la pièce, ni le plaisir du public. En effet, l'adaptation de Lucy Cuthbertson véhicule des images optimistes grâce à son rythme tourbillonnant, accélérant le rythme en allant à l'essentiel, mais sans compromettre le développement du récit, ni lui donner un aspect précipité. En fait, une telle décision parvient à souligner certains des thèmes principaux de la pièce, rendant ainsi plus compréhensibles les choix impulsifs des personnages, tout en commentant discrètement la nature instinctive de l'âme humaine qui ignore les conseils de prudence et de raison lorsque la passion prend le dessus.

IV. Romeo et Juliet ou le portrait d'une jeune génération ?

L'alchimie entre les deux jeunes amoureux est sans aucun doute cruciale pour le succès du récit. Romeo apparaît toujours comme l'amoureux transi qui adore et vénère son « Bright Angel » (Acte II, scène 2)[5]. Lucy Cuthbertson fait le choix de le présenter dans sa complexité. En effet, il incarne le « gentle Romeo » (Mercutio, I.4.15), le « sweet Romeo » (Juliet, II.2.147), le passionné « Romeo ! humours, madman ! passion ! lover ! (Mercutio, II.1.9), puis le juste « Fair Montague » (Juliet, II.2.104), sans oublier le « good son » (Frère Laurence, II.3.50). Malheureusement, cette version courte ne nous laisse pas entrevoir longtemps la magie du couple que forment Romeo et Juliet. Très vite, le Romeo de Hayden Mampasi perd en crédibilité, interprété avec trop de légèreté ; il devient un personnage plus populaire que noble, voire parfois comique.

Lucy Cuthbertson n'a jamais édulcoré le message central qu'elle a pour son jeune public : celui de la violence qui engendre la violence. Les combats surviennent et sont très récurrents. Il s'agit d'affaires brutales menées à coups de matraque de police et de couperets de cuisine. « Throw your mistemper'd weapons to the ground / And hear the sentence of your moved prince » (I.1.15-16), dit le Prince furieux, qui est aussi le chef de la police. Au fur et à mesure de la représentation, de grandes photographies des victimes de la guerre des gangs sont placées sur le devant du balcon central. Puis, après une bagarre, Lady Montague (Mariéme Diouf)[6], une femme noire portant un foulard bleu et jaune et une robe chemise assortie jusqu'aux genoux, vient avec inquiétude à la recherche de son fils, Romeo.

Le public constate, en parallèle, qu'il s'agit d'une production inclusive[7], notamment lorsque Mercutio (Ashley Byam) attire Tybalt (Liam King) dans cette spirale infernale. Il le fait avec un long et persistant baiser sur les lèvres, à la grande surprise du public, qui accompagne le geste du comédien tantôt par des applaudissements, tantôt par des acclamations de joie. La présence des jeunes adolescents dans le théâtre donne d'autant plus de vigueur à la pièce qui s'emballe dès le premier Acte au rythme des réactions et des cris du public enchanté. Cette réaction va de pair avec la cadence de la première partie de la pièce. Dans l'un des moments les plus effrayants de la représentation, lorsque le cycliste s'arrête près du cadavre de Mercutio (Acte III, scène 1), ce n'est pas pour offrir de l'aide mais pour prendre des *selfies*. La mise en scène, ancrée dans une réalité contemporaine violente, présente des scènes de crime visuellement parlantes à un jeune public habitué aux séries télévisées policières et aux fictions sanglantes. C'est en effet le matériel des experts en criminalité qui est utilisé : scotch au sol, sacs mortuaires, gants de légiste. Les comédiens incarnant des policiers apparaissent en uniformes, comme ceux qu'ils porteraient dans la réalité s'ils étaient appelés sur une scène de crime à Londres — des policiers avec des gilets anti-couteau, des vestes haute visibilité et des chapeaux noirs avec des motifs en

damier. Les légistes, eux, sont vêtus de blanc jusqu'aux pieds, capuches relevées pour couvrir leurs cheveux.

Dans une interview parue dans *The Official London Theatre*, Lucy Cuthberston explique : « lorsque l'on travaille avec les enfants, bizarrement, il n'est pas tant question de défi […], ils viennent avec aucune idée préconçue et prennent l'intrigue et le tout au pied de la lettre …[8] ». Ainsi, le rythme est endiablé, accéléré dans cette version créée spécialement pour un jeune public, invitant à la découverte du monde de Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet* demeure une des intrigues les plus connues auprès des jeunes à travers des thématiques atemporelles comme la passion amoureuse, ou la rivalité entre les clans.

À l'Acte IV, l'un des moments forts est l'épisode où les hallucinations prennent le dessus sur le verbe et le geste : Juliet est hantée par le fantôme de son cousin mourant et sa présence physique traduit sa souffrance. La scène s'accompagne en effet d'hallucinations où se mêlent des personnages qui portent des oreilles de lapin, d'autres des lunettes en forme de cœur. Lucy Cuthbertson cherche à aborder le sujet de la violence, de la drogue et de la mort en mêlant humour et gravité. Ces épisodes déguisés permettent à la fois une pause dans la narration, un moment de comique de situation, ce qui permet d'alléger le message et de faire en sorte que les jeunes puissent « digérer » le contexte contemporain et turbulent de la violence de rue.

Juliet s'endort après avoir bu la potion (scène 3). Et le cycliste menaçant réapparaît portant un masque de panda et un tutu rose fluorescent, toujours dans ce souci de désamorcer un sujet difficile pour des jeunes, tandis que l'ensemble des personnages danse au rythme des percussions. Paris (Simeon Desvignes), vêtu d'un costume argenté, entame un *strip-tease* étonnant qui amuse le jeune public[9]. La tension demeure présente : le cycliste qui tourbillonne rappelle les cercles infernaux dans lesquels les personnages sont enfermés. Sa performance est à couper le souffle. Il reproduit des figures de haute voltige au-dessus du lit de Juliette, juste au-dessus de son visage. Les spectateurs retiennent leur souffle alors que Juliet est saisie dans sa tourmente.

V. Quand l'art des rues s'invite à l'intérieur du Globe[10]

Dans cette adaptation, l'idée est de relocaliser la pièce dans une culture de « street art ». Le partenariat entre le théâtre du Globe et la Deutsche Bank[11] permet aux jeunes générations de découvrir l'expérience shakespearienne et de la vivre pleinement. Et, en effet, la production capture l'essence même de l'intrigue : la culture de la violence qui peut s'infiltrer à tous les niveaux et détruire des vies souvent très jeunes. Dans un entretien daté de 2009 pour la Kidbrooke School, Lucy Cuthberston justifiait déjà ce choix de mise en scène très contemporaine et très réaliste en expliquant que les fais récents de violence de l'époque à Londres l'avait menée à opérer des résonnances avec l'actualité[12]. Ainsi, dans la version accélérée de 2024 au Globe, elle reprend les prémisses de la version de 2009 proposée dans les ateliers de la Kidbrooke School. De plus, en faisant appel à Owen Gawthorpe, cycliste professionnel de « trial », Lucy Cuthberston revient sur son idée initiale[13] : mettre en scène des vélos, se souvenant d'un fait divers survenu à Londres[14]. S'agissant d'une version raccourcie, le risque est de rentrer dans une cadence trop soutenue qui effacerait les épisodes plus romantiques, comme le premier baiser de Romeo et Juliet. Néanmoins, même si la première partie semble très accélérée, force est de constater que les moments les plus forts, comme cette rencontre et

ce premier baiser, sont préservés. Aussi l'adaptation raccourcie semble-t-elle réussie. Chris Wiegand du *Guardian* met en avant le succès de cette version et en relève le côté enflammé[15]. Dans le *Broadway World*, Alice Cope ajoute qu'il s'agit d'une adaptation passionnante par sa contemporanéité[16]. À son tour, *The Indiepended*[17] souligne l'engagement des comédiens dans cette version accessible, aux thèmes si contemporains, à laquelle un jeune public pourra s'identifier[18].

Finalement, en adaptant Shakespeare à la jeune génération, c'est toute une production qui se lance le défi de faire vivre une expérience culturelle, littéraire, esthétique et théâtrale. À travers sa proposition, Lucy Cuthberston s'impose encore une fois comme une metteuse en scène prometteuse. La puissance de son imagination et de sa réalisation artistique et esthétique dans un lieu aux décors *street-art* a su permettre à un public jeune de s'approprier sa proposition scénique, et aux spectateurs plus aguerris de se familiariser avec une version scénique raccourcie, audacieuse et efficace malgré son rythme soutenu.

Notes

[1] Lucy Cuthbertson est directrice du Département pour l'Éducation au Globe Theatre et mène, depuis 2019, un programme d'apprentissage en famille (« Learning and Family work »). Elle a notamment proposé un vaste panel d'offres pendant le confinement. **URL**.

[2] La « Violence Reduction Unit » (VRU) de Londres est une équipe de spécialistes qui rassemble les habitants de Londres pour mieux comprendre pourquoi la violence se produit et prendre des mesures pour la prévenir maintenant et à long terme. **URL**. Accès 05/11/2024.

[3] « Playing Shakespeare with the Deutsche Bank », article par Fay Barrett, 4 Avril 2024 (nous traduisons). **URL**.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 1594-96, The Library Shakespeare, Limited Edition, London, Midpoint Press, 2006.

[6] Mariéme Diouf joue à la fois le rôle de Lady Montague et de Frère Laurence. Plus qu'une nécessité pratique, ce choix d'attribuer deux personnages différents (« role doubling ») à un même comédien permettait, à l'époque élisabéthaine, de mettre l'emphase sur les connections thématiques entre les personnages, d'établir des liens, des contrastes entre eux. Cette technique repose sur l'engagement et la capacité du public à s'impliquer dans la représentation.

[7] Le théâtre inclusif est un théâtre dans lequel chacun peut être représenté, peu importe son genre, son origine, sa religion ou son orientation sexuelle. Dans cette représentation, Lucy Cuthbertson intègre le thème lié à l'identité sexuelle et à l'acceptation de soi et crée ainsi un récit qui résonne pour de nombreuses personnes. Elle offre une représentation positive et complexe de l'homosexualité et du genre.

[8] Interview de Kitty Underwood, 24 août 2022, mise à jour 31 août 2022. « I think when you work with children that age weirdly they're aren't that many challenges! They don't come with any

preconceptions, so they just take it at face value, and they take the story at face value. I think the way children think is very different, they're less confined by logic and often Shakespeare's plays— » (c'est nous qui traduisons). **URL**. Accès 05/11/2024.

[9] Dans une interview donnée en 2021 pour la NAPE (« National Association for Primary Education »), Lucy Cuthbertson explique que le public voit souvent *Romeo et Juliet* comme une romance, alors qu'il s'agit d'une tragédie qui traite du thème de la mort. Elle ajoute qu'à la fin de la représentation, le jeune public sera amené à réfléchir à des questions plus profondes. Mais cependant, il s'agit, pour elle, de susciter l'intérêt de ce jeune public, de le divertir et de le garder impliqué, car le théâtre et les arts en général pourraient être bénéfiques aussi pour la santé mentale et le bien-être. Elle revient d'ailleurs sur l'expérience pendant et après la Covid et sur la nécessité de revoir les formats et de trouver des biais différents pour impliquer ce jeune public. **URL**. Accès 05/11/2024.

[10] On pense ici notamment au graffiti représentant le portrait de Shakespeare peint par Jimmy C. dans les quartiers populaires de la rive sud de la Tamise (Clink Street), non loin du Globe.

[11] La Deutsche Bank soutient le Globe à travers un partenariat éducatif afin de permettre aux jeunes, qui soit sont dans le secondaire, soit poursuivent leurs études au-delà de seize ans, de vivre l'expérience Shakespeare. Chaque année, une production accélérée de 90 minutes d'une pièce du curriculum scolaire est mise en scène. Des sessions et ateliers sont également proposés aux jeunes étudiants ainsi qu'aux enseignants.

[12] Entretien avec Lucy Cuthbertson et sa troupe sur sa mise en scène de *Romeo et Juliet* au Riverside Studios à Londres, du 17 au 21 novembre 2009. *Kidbrooke School on Romeo and Juliet*. October 2009. **URL**.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.* Dans cette interview de 2009, Lucy Cuthbertson fait référence à un meurtre (« a nasty murder ») survenu à Londres quelques années auparavant, qui marqua les esprits par sa violence : un groupe de jeunes cyclistes à capuche avaient encerclé un jeune garçon, et cela avait semblé être une véritable exécution aux yeux des passants. Et d'ajouter qu'ils avaient alors pu fuir grâce à leurs vélos. Lucy Cuthbertson explique ainsi l'intérêt de la présence de vélos sur scène : « the bikes have almost become a sort of romance, a sort of get away ».

[15] Chris Wiegand, Stage director for *The Guardian* : « Well-performed across the board … This is a thrilling, fiery-footed staging », 24 Mars 2024. **URL**. Accès 25/05/2024.

[16] Alice Cope, Broadway World, « an exciting and contemporary makeover at the iconic Globe Theatre, enchanting younger audiences with modern twists, an engaging diverse cast and daring BMX stunts », 8 Mars 2024. **URL**. Accès 25/05/2024.

[17] À noter qu'il s'agit bien de *The Indiependent* et non *The Independent.*

[18] « The performances are engaging enough to keep anyone invested even when the action is minimal and it is simply two characters having a conversation. The choice to set the play in modern South London makes it not only easily accessible for today's younger audience, but also reminds us how resonant its messages still are today », Gareth Griffiths, *The Indiependent,* 24 Avril 2024. **URL**. Accès 25/05/2024.

Nathalie Robert-Jurado

Nathalie Robert-Jurado est professeure certifiée au Lycée Pierre du Terrail à Pontcharra où elle enseigne l'anglais de spécialité. Formée à l'Université Stendhal de Grenoble (UGA), elle est titulaire d'un DEA en langues, littératures et civilisations du monde anglophone, d'une double licence LLCER-Lettres et d'un module « Imaginaire et Imagination » en maîtrise de lettres modernes. Ses travaux de recherche de doctorat portent sur l'exploitation des textes de William Shakespeare dans les classes Arts et Langues. Elle a co-organisé une journée d'études en décembre 2023 à l'UGA et notamment une exposition d'œuvres en lien avec *Hamlet,* pièce pour laquelle elle a publié dernièrement : « *Hamlet à l'épreuve des nouvelles générations* » (PUN, 2023).

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Henry IV, Our Saviour?

Par Sabina Laskowska-Hinz
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Polish Theatre, Warsaw,
William Shakespeare: *King Henry IV* [Historia Henryka IV]

Director: Ivan Alexandre
Design: Antoine Fontaine
Costumes: Dorota Kołodyńska
Sound: Leszek Lorent
Light: Robert Mleczko
Dramaturgy: Piotr Kamiński

Cast
King Henry IV: Andrzej Seweryn
Prince Henry & Hal: Paweł Krucz
Lancaster/Peto: Dorota Bzdyla
John Falstaff: Szymon Kuśmider
Henry Percy & Hotspur: Modest Ruciński
Lady Percy: Hanna Skarga

Premiere: 10 October 2024
Running time: 3:30 hours

Ivan Alexandre's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*—primarily based on Part One of the two *Henry IV* plays—premiered at Polish Theatre in Warsaw on 10 October 2024. Piotr Kamiński, a known translator of Shakespeare, is responsible for the script. He provides the actors with a semi-modern version of the text that is easy for the audience to follow. Yet the production seems somewhat uneven, divided into two parts: the first addresses problematic plot issues of Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part One*, while the second part—much shorter—is a compact summary of the battle. The title of the production was slightly altered and elongated to reflect the director's anecdotal reading of the play *The Story of Henry IV with an Account of the Shrewsbury Battle Between Prince Henry and Lord Henry Percy and the Ramblings of Sir Falstaff* ["Historia Henryka IV z opisem bitwy pod Shrewsbury między księciem Henrykiem a lordem Henrykiem Percym wraz z szelmostwami sir Falstaffa"].

William Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* is a story where serious aspects and comic scenes find a soothing balance. Shakespeare's audience learns about an unstable military situation, the shedding of fraternal blood, and the precarious situation of a ruler. Henry IV had deprived his predecessor of the crown with the support of allies who have now turned into sour rebels. This plot is contrasted with the comic figure of Sir John Falstaff and his merry companions, who provide the viewer with comic relief. This includes clumsy attempts at robbery, inappropriate wooing, and verbal skirmishes among friends. The playwright offers the audience alternating stimuli for thought and laughter.

Ivan Alexandre remains faithful to the unfolding of the story. The stage design, costumes, and props instil a religious atmosphere. A structure framing the stage enhances the indication of various iconographic references. Giant black machines take over the stage. All elements are adjusted on a round platform. A mechanism rotates the construction of two massive symmetrical four-sided towers with balconies at the top, where the musical instruments are placed, and the passages that join them. The symmetry, its right angles, and intersecting paths provide solid frames for individual scenes. Thus, the space between the towers constitutes

enormous painting frameworks for animated images of duels [Figure 1], i.e. military scenes, figure portraits or a still life with royal insignias.



1. Douglas (Tomasz Błasiak) and Sir Walter Blunt (Antoni Ostrouch).
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

Each rotation of the construction generates a different kind of space which allows the audience to visit a public room at the castle, the bedroom in Mistress Quickly's tavern, training chambers in Northumberland, or the house of the archdeacon of Bangor. In the end, the stage turns into a battlefield. The machinery plays a symbolic role: fortune changes. Music, stage lights and dark costumes enhance an atmosphere of a massive scale, as sometimes experienced in the vast interiors of modern churches.

The production poster is the performance's most significant asset to promote its painterly character and includes numerous references to Western European art [Figure 2]. The image provides a short glimpse of what the audience might expect on stage. However, this advertisement of Alexandre's *Henry IV* could also be slightly misleading, though it reveals the formal nature of the adaptation. Four men in the centre pose against a dark background. They are paired according to age and prospect of success. In the foreground are two sitting figures: Szymon Kuśmider's Falstaff and Andrzej Seweryn's King Henry IV (from left). Two younger men standing right behind them are Modest Ruciński's Lord Henry Percy (Hotspur) and Paweł Krucz's Prince Henry (Hal) [Figure 3].



2. Frans Badens, *Civic Guardsmen from a company of the Crossbow Civic Guard* [a detail],
1613, Amsterdam Museum (**URL**).
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



3. Poster: Historia Henryka IV z opisem bitwy pod Shrewsbury między księciem Henrykiem a lordem Henrykiem Percym wraz z szelmostwami sir Falstaffa [*The Story of Henry IV with an Account of the Shrewsbury Battle Between Prince Henry and Lord Henry Percy and the Ramblings of Sir Falstaff*].
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

The poster is arranged to remind viewers of old Dutch paintings by Frans Hals or Rembrandt. The facial expressions, gestures, and props are taken almost directly from these painters' works. Eventually, the poster references the 17th-century Western European art heritage with a similar application of chiaroscuro, colours, composition, and military character. Chiaroscuro and the contrast between light and darkness are prominent in this production.

The Polish stage adaptation opens with the king expressing his hopes for peace: Henry IV (Andrzej Seweryn) stands in the centre of a cross formed by two elevated and crossed footbridges—a beam of bright light from above illuminates his rigidly upright form wearing a crown of thorns, holding a long spear. The dark atmosphere and his monotonous speeches establish the king's sublimity, and he becomes an incarnation of a Christ—a defender of Death and Evil [Figure 4]. The opening parallels the closing scene when the battle ends, corpses remain on a sandy stage, and the survivors are on their knees. The king, still wearing the crown of thorns, occupies the central space. A faint light from above illuminates his figure and Henry IV—on his knees—later prays to God. Nooses hang high above the actors' heads, except the king [Figure 5]. Thus, Henry IV seems to be portrayed as a Christian saviour in this adaptation.



4. The opening scene.
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



5. The ending scene.
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

There are numerous intertextual references in this production, either verbal or iconographical. The characters share lines from other Shakespearean plays: for example, Falstaff calls out, "Hal! A plague upon you both!" (*1 Heny IV*, II.2.19-20), echoing Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. The Director Alexandre additionally enriches the adaptation by introducing iconic stage arrangements, e.g. a balcony scene, where, in this case, Hal (Paweł Krucz) and Falstaff (Szymon Kuśmider) remind us of Juliet and Romeo [Figure 6]. He also adds a graveyard scene, suggesting a *Hamlet* reference, but here the protagonist is replaced by Falstaff holding a scull in the middle of a sandy battlefield [Figure 7].



6. Hal (Paweł Krucz) and Falstaff (Szymon Kuśmider).
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



7. Falstaff (Szymon Kuśmider) on a battlefield.
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

Alexandre and his stage designer Fontaine reach for further references and allusions when they evoke reminders of Beckett's Winnie from his *Happy Days*. The Welsh hero Owen Glendower

(Sławomir Grzymkowski) is dug into the sandy surface of the stage. He appears as a supernatural creature with a crown hovering in the air just behind him [Figures 8, 9].



8. Owen Glendower (Sławomir Grzymkowski).
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



9. Owen Glendower (Sławomir Grzymkowski) and the crown.
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

Here, just in front of Glendower, the rebels Northumberland and his son Hotspur (Modest Ruciński) draw and divide a map of England, Scotland and Wales among themselves. It is as if they were building sandcastles in the air. This comparison already indicates the failure of this company. After the battle, Hal [then Falstaff, Figure 10] will stand over the dead body of Hotspur as an image of Saint George over the slaughtered dragon [Figure 11].



10. Falstaff (Szymon Kuśmider) over the body of Hotspur (Modest Ruciński).
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



11. Saint George fighting with a dragon, a sculpture crowning the Court of the Brotherhood of Saint George, 1566, Gdansk (**URL**).

There is little space for femininity in this overwhelming male theatrical world of Shakespeare's drama. Only two female characters appear on stage. They play the conventional roles of sexually aroused, demanding, and manipulative people. In Warsaw, costumes underline their lechery. The audience witnesses Mistress Quickly (Katarzyna Strączek) in flagrante delicto with a naked Hal. In a highly intimate scene, she only wears a light celadon, an unbuttoned shirt, for the whole scene [Figure 12]. Lady Percy (Hanna Skarga), in contrast, wears tight black trousers and a corset with exposed shoulders and a prominent neckline [Figure 13]. This provocative outfit highlights the behaviour towards her husband: she constantly demands intimacy, fakes sexual intercourse, kisses, and caresses his naked chest. Femininity in this production is limited to erotism and the only women in this drama are a whore and a lusty wife.



12. Mistress Quickly (Katarzyna Strączek) and Hal (Paweł Krucz).
Crédits. Karolina Jóźwiak. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.



13. Hotspur (Modest Ruciński) with his wife, Lady Percy (Hanna Skarga).
Crédits. Krzysztof Bieliński. Property of Polish Theatre, Warsaw.

However, there is one more female actor (Dorota Bzdyla) playing two male figures in Alexandre's adaptation: as Peto, Bzdyla identifies with the male side of this role—she is a tomboy, troublemaker, and happy companion to Hal.

As John of Lancaster, Hal's younger brother, her appearance is somewhat different: she supplements the character with delicacy and gentleness, characteristic of youth and possibly effeminacy.

The emotional scenes between the brothers and how Hal takes care of younger prince after the battle reveal a compassionate human side of the king-to-be. Bzdyla, in this double role, highlights glimpses of gentleness in the male world of treachery, battles, and death.

Since 1902, fifteen Polish adaptations of *King Henry IV* have been produced. This production, the second in the 21st century,[1] is a treat for Shakespeare theatre enthusiasts.

Bibliographie

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Notes

[1] The previous 21st-century production of *Henry IV Part I* premiered on 4 November 2005, directed by Jan Kulczyński and performed by Scena Inicjatyw Artystycznych [Artistic Initiatives Stage], Warsaw. In Poland, there have only been sixteen theatre productions of *Henry IV* since 1902 (most of them in the 1960s and 1970s). **URL**.

Sabina Laskowska-Hinz

Dr. Sabina Laskowska-Hinz teaches English Literature at the University of Gdansk in Poland. In 2022, she obtained her doctorate with a thesis entitled *"The Picture Gives Me Content": Critical Interpretations of Polish Theatre Posters for Shakespeare Productions in the Years 1966-1989. A study of motives and approaches* (at the University of Warsaw). She has published articles and a book review in national and international journals, including and "Designing Goddesses: Shakespeare's 'Othello' and Marian Nowiński's 'Otello Desdemona'" in *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, "Jaques and the Wounded Stag by William Hodges, Sawrey Gilpin and George Romney:(Re) Painting Shakespeare's Melancholic Figure" in *Anglica*, "Who are Our Gods? The Iconographic, Religious and Cosmic Commentary on William Shakespeare's "The Tempest" by Wojciech Siudmak (1978)" in Rocznik Historii Sztuki [Yearbook of Art History] and "Much Ado About a Spider: 'Much Ado About Nothing' in Polish and International Theatre Posters of the 20th and 21st Centuries" in *Shakespeare en devenir* (online). The latest article, "Champ de blé aux corbeaux: The Tragedy of Macbeth (2021) by Joel Coen", was co-written with Imke Lichterfeld and published *in Utpictura 18*. Her main interests are text-image relations, Shakespearean theatre posters, and artists as literary critics.

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N° 18 | 2024
Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Les Shakespeare immersifs de Léonard Matton, récit d'une aventure prometteuse

Volet 1. *Helsingør, Château d'Hamlet*, et l'on oublie le temps…

Compagnie Emersiøn, Léonard Matton (9 mai 2024)

Par Estelle Rivier-Arnaud et Chloé Giroud
Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

> **Pour citer ce document**

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Helsingør, Château d'Hamlet

Création
Traduction, adaptation et mise en espaces : Léonard Matton
Assistanat et dramaturgie : Camille Delpech
Création musicale : Claire Mahieux
Création univers sonore : Enzo di Meo, Clément Hubert, Claire Mahieux
Régie sonore : Enzo di Meo, Clément Hubert, Claire Mahieux, Théo Cardoso
Création costumes : Chouchane Abello assistée de Jean Doucet, Jérôme Ragon
Régie générale : Stéphane Maugeri, Matthieu Desbourdes
Régie lumières : Mohammed Mokkaddemini, Ugo Perez, Chloé Roger
Relation public et billetterie : Florianne Delahousse, Joanna Flahault, Carla Girod
Maître d'armes : Pierre Berçot
Décors et accessoires : A2R Compagnie — Antre de Rêves
Production : Mathilde Gamon assistée de Fanny Laurent et Kamir Amrani

Comédiens
Bernardo et Rosencrantz : Anthony Falkowsky ou Thomas Gendronneau
Claudius : Roch-Antoine Albaladéjo ou Loïc Brabant
Gertrude : Zazie Delem ou Claire Mirande
Hamlet : Benjamin Brenière, Gaël Giraudeau ou Stanislas Roquette
Horatio : Cédric Carlier ou Laurent Labruyère
Laërte et un comédien : Mathias Marty ou Matthieu Protin
Marcellus et Guildenstern : Jérôme Ragon ou Hervé Rey
Ophélie : Camille Delpech ou Marjorie Dubus
Polonius et Fou : Dominique Bastien ou Jean-Loup Horwitz
Spectre, un comédien et Fossoyeur : Michel Chalmeau et Jacques Poix-Terrier



1. Hamlet (Gaël Giraudeau). Helsingør, Château d'Hamlet.
Crédits. Eric Sanger-Monteros.

I. Entrer dans un lieu

Vivre une aventure immersive se joue avant même d'être entré dans l'espace dédié à la représentation. Après avoir traversé la grande cour du Château de Vincennes, être passés non loin de la chapelle tout juste rénovée, nous sommes accueillis par un homme vêtu d'un long

manteau noir qui nous souhaite la bienvenue « aux noces de Gertrude et Claudius ». Nous passons les douves et un autre groupe de personnes nous confie un petit bracelet de couleur et promet de prendre soin de notre téléphone portable qui sera mis en réserve pendant la déambulation. Puis, nous sommes conduits dans l'enceinte principale du château où il est possible de prendre une collation … Les festivités sont sur le point de commencer.

La création de *Helsingør, Château d'Hamlet* remonte à 2018, après que Léonard Matton, jeune metteur en scène issu d'une famille d'artistes[1], trouve un lieu — une ancienne friche industrielle au cœur du 5e arrondissement de Paris — où il peut envisager de voir son projet mis en œuvre. Il baptise le lieu : « Le Secret ». Si adapter Shakespeare en théâtre immersif est une expérience connue outre-manche, grâce notamment à *Sleep no More* de la compagnie Punchdrunk[2], le projet relève de la gageure en France. En effet, imaginer l'intrigue du prince danois dans un espace sans frontières entre spectateurs et comédiens paraît très ambitieux car le public français est plus coutumier des salles obscures, dans le confort de la pénombre et de l'anonymat[3]. Pourtant, le projet rencontre un franc succès, et s'il s'interrompt lors de la fermeture des théâtres pendant la pandémie, il trouve un autre lieu en 2021, au Château de Vincennes, avec le soutien du Ministère de la Culture et des Monuments historiques.

Le site du Château de Vincennes relève du patrimoine français et est soumis à un usage réglementé, mais il est aussi un lieu idéal pour une pièce comme *Hamlet* dont l'intrigue est supposée se dérouler au Danemark, au sein du château d'Elseneur, ou « Elsinore » comme mentionné dans la pièce de Shakespeare. Léonard Matton entend ainsi utiliser le décor naturel du château pour y faire évoluer l'action. Celle-ci est découpée en plusieurs mouvements qui ne suivent pas la chronologie habituelle. Le spectateur n'en connaîtra donc que quelques épisodes selon son parcours dans le château. C'est le principe même du théâtre immersif que de laisser déambuler le « public » de façon libre au sein d'une action qu'il approche au plus près, sans jamais s'assoir (ou presque) et sans distanciation. Même s'il n'est pas costumé ni fardé comme le sont les comédiens, il fait alors partie intégrante de la représentation. Le nommer « spect-*acteur* » est donc beaucoup plus approprié pour décrire son rôle.

Après la collation, une cloche se fait soudain entendre et, dans les hauteurs du château, une voix caverneuse — identifiable à celle du spectre — indique aux badauds les modalités de déambulation qu'il conviendra de respecter. Il faudra d'abord que chacun, selon la couleur de son bracelet, se range sous le porte-enseigne de la même couleur ; chacun sera ensuite guidé dans une salle spécifique du château où une scène sera jouée. Après seulement, chacun sera libre de suivre tel ou tel personnage dans un autre lieu de l'édifice.



2. Suivre ou se perdre ? Telle est la question.
Crédits. Mélanie Dorey.

II. Une expérience individuelle …

Me voici donc plongée dans la chambre d'Ophélie pour débuter mon voyage dans la tragédie. Dans une petite salle éclairée de bougies, Ophélie (alternativement Marjorie Dubus et Camille Delpech) lit les lettres qu'elle a reçues d'Hamlet (alternativement Benjamin Brenière, Gaël Giraudeau et Stanislas Roquette). Elle est allongée lascivement sur un lit rond non loin duquel une table et un miroir lui serviront de coiffeuse plus tard dans son chemin vers la folie … mais pour l'instant, elle semble réjouie de l'amour que lui porte le prince et ni son frère Laërte (Mathias Marty ou Matthieu Protin), ni son père Polonius (Dominique Bastien ou Jean-Loup Horwitz) ne pourront rien y changer. Nous autres, présents dans la scène, observons les échanges animés qui s'ensuivent entre père, fils et fille, sans oser intervenir quoique nous nous sentions quelque peu impliqués lorsque nous croisons le regard sévère de l'un, soumis ou implorant de l'autre, au fil des répliques. Mon choix sera de suivre Polonius, par un escalier de pierre qui n'en finit pas de monter, pour me retrouver quelques étages plus haut, là où d'autres spectateurs ont assisté au banquet de Claudius et Gertrude.

L'expérience est unique ensuite car, bien sûr, au gré des envies, nous nous retrouvons à assister à certains épisodes de l'intrigue aux dépens d'autres. Au terme de ma déambulation, j'aurai, par exemple, été témoin de l'échange entre Hamlet et Gertrude (Zazie Delem ou Claire Mirande) dans la chambre privée de celle-ci, d'une scène où Ophélie lit les lettres d'Hamlet, de la rencontre des comédiens avec Hamlet en présence de Polonius, Guildenstern et Rosencrantz, de la scène dite de « la Souricière » où surgit Ophélie outrageusement fardée et déjà prise de folie, puis de sa mort en public dans la cour du château, la gorge tranchée (fin beaucoup plus spectaculaire), enfin de la scène de dénouement qui réunit l'ensemble des *« spect-acteurs »* dans la cour du château.



3. Scène finale dans la cour du Château de Vincennes.
Crédits. Compagnie Emersiøn.

III. … et collective

La déambulation ne dure qu'une heure et quart, mais nous en ressortons épuisés d'avoir grimpé et descendu les marches de nombreuses fois, nous perdant parfois dans une petite alcôve isolée ou dans une salle laissée vide… L'esprit est cependant toujours en éveil car, outre l'attention portée à une scène, nous pouvons aussi choisir d'emprunter le tour de ronde sans chercher à y croiser un personnage, ou bien de feuilleter un ouvrage et d'observer les détails du décor, ou bien encore de s'installer à la coiffeuse d'Ophélie, la regarder se poudrer, lire ses lettres en s'asseyant sur ce même lit où nous l'avons vue précédemment, simplement pour le plaisir de *s'immerger* dans l'histoire de *Hamlet* et se fondre dans l'ombre inquiétante du château.

Jeunes et moins jeunes y trouveront un intérêt unique : le théâtre immersif est un lieu de partage, tout autant qu'un espace de subjectivité. Il faut le vivre plusieurs fois pour se rendre compte de la façon dont il engage la diversité des points de vue. Une prochaine fois, je commencerai par la scène où apparaît le spectre de feu Hamlet sur la passerelle surplombant la cour intérieure, et mon parcours sera tout autre. Tout autres seront aussi ma compréhension de la pièce et des motivations de ses personnages. C'est cela l'intérêt : vivre l'œuvre de manière singulière — aussi bien individuelle que collective — lors de chaque *plongée* dans le monde de Shakespeare.



4. Hamlet (Stanislas Roquette). Un public intergénérationnel et attentif lors de la scène finale.
Crédits. Compagnie Emersiøn.

Notes

[1] Fils de Charles Matton, artiste, et de Sylvie Matton, autrice et frère de Jules, compositeur.

[2] **URL**.

[3] Yves Bonnefoy avait déjà eu une idée similaire dans « Première ébauche d'une mise en scène d'*Hamlet* » et « *Hamlet* en montagne », *L'heure présente*. Paris, Mercure de France, 2011, p. 63-78. À ce sujet, voir également Pascale Drouet, « *L'heure présente* et *Hamlet* : dialoguer, dialoguer encore avec Shakespeare », in *Yves Bonnefoy. Poésie et dialogue*, Textes réunis par Michèle Finck et Patrick Werly, Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2013, p. 231-246.

Estelle Rivier-Arnaud

Estelle Rivier-Arnaud est Professeur en Études anglophones à l'Université Grenoble — Alpes. Spécialiste du théâtre, en particulier de l'adaptation du texte à la scène, elle a publié articles et ouvrages à ce sujet, le plus souvent en collaboration avec des professionnels de la scène. Elle participe actuellement à plusieurs projets collaboratifs de recherche-création, *The Gut Girls,* Sarah Daniels (L'Harmattan, 2025), *The Lifeblood,* Glyn Maxwell (PUM, 2026), et « Nuit » d'après *La Nuit des rois,* William Shakespeare. Sa dernière monographie, *The Reinvention of Hamlet by Our Contemporaries: Excavating The Unknown* est à paraître.

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Les Shakespeare immersifs de Léonard Matton, récit d'une aventure prometteuse

Volet 2. *Le Fléau, Mesure pour Mesure* : plongée au cœur des intrigues de Vienne

Compagnie Emersiøn, Léonard Matton (27 août 2023)

Par Estelle Rivier-Arnaud et Chloé Giroud
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Le Fléau, *Mesure Pour Mesure*

Création
Metteur en scène : Léonard Matton
Musiques : Thalie Amossé et Laurent Labruyère
Costumes : Chouchane Abello et le Conservatoire du costume
Décors / Accessoires : Julie Mahieu
Assistanat mise en scène / dramaturgie : Camille Delpech
Direction de production : Mathilde Gamon
Administration de production : Fanny Laurent

Comédiens
Lucio : Roch-Antoine Albaladéjo
La chanteuse : Thalie Amossé
Gina la Fataliste : Jean-Baptiste Barbier-Arribe
Moudugenou et Salecochon : Dominique Bastien
Fisdepute : Maxime Chartier
Mme Surfoutue : Zazie Delem
Marianne et Francesca : Camille Delpech
Isabelle : Marjorie Dubus
Angelo : Thomas Gendronneau
Pompé Lecul : Jean-Loup Horwitz
Frère Pierre : Laurent Labruyère
Escalus : David Legras
Juliette / Maria la Prostituée : Justine Marçais
Le Duc Vincentio : Mathias Mary
Claudio : Drys Penthier
Le Geôlier : Jacques Poix-Terrier
Givré : Jérôme Ragon
La garde : Carla Girod et Florianne Delahousse

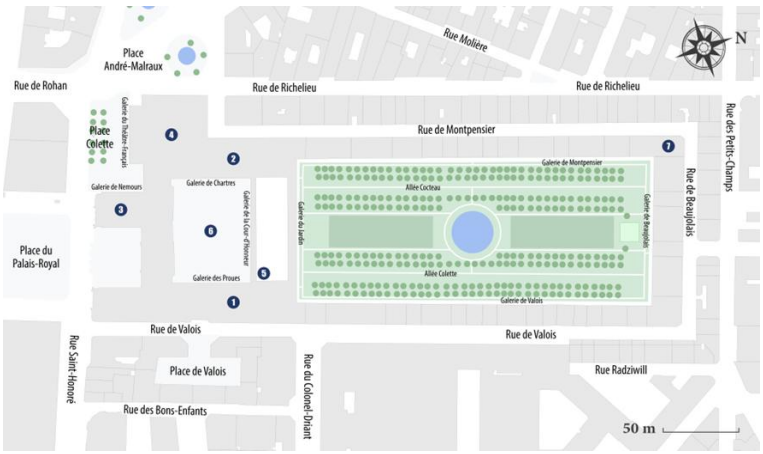
I. L'avant-spectacle : entrer dans la pièce

La veille de la représentation, assise sur mon canapé devant mon émission préférée, mon téléphone sonne. Je viens de recevoir un e-mail, ou plutôt une missive, d'une certaine Francesca : « Les palais somptueux de Vienne se dressent comme des symboles d'orgueil et de dépravation … ». C'est ainsi que débute *Le Fléau*. Nous, spectateurs, venons de faire irruption dans le monde de *Mesure pour Mesure*, et nous sommes attendus le lendemain à la cour de Vienne.

Cette entrée en matière sera le *leitmotiv* de toute l'adaptation que propose Léonard Matton. Il s'agira continuellement de flouter les contours qui séparent la fiction de la réalité. Des personnages s'adressent directement à nous, dans notre vie personnelle. Dès cet instant, nous nous emparons du rôle de spectateur. Pourtant, ce n'est pas au spectateur que Francesca adresse ce courrier, mais à un voyageur de passage à Vienne. Dans *Le Fléau*, le public est inclus dans la représentation.

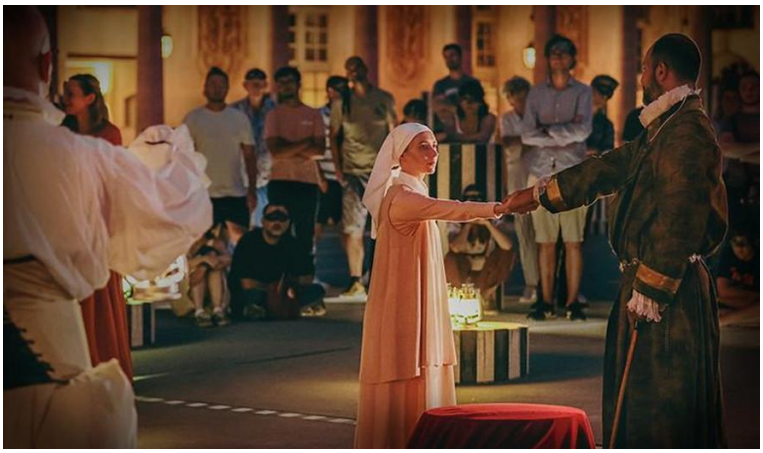
Le lendemain, jour de la représentation, nous nous présentons à l'entrée du Domaine du Palais-Royal qui se trouve du côté Place Colette, Paris (1er arrondissement), comme indiqué dans

l'email reçu la veille. Nous arrivons bien avant le début de la représentation : les portes de la ville, nous a-t-on expliqué, « seront fermées trente minutes avant le début de la représentation ». Un homme coiffé d'un chapeau melon et paré de lunettes de soleil rondes nous accueille. Il s'agit du Chef d'Orchestre, joué par Léonard Matton lui-même. Nous pénétrons dans la cour, déposons notre téléphone à l'accueil, et recevons en échange un loup, qu'il faudra porter durant toute la durée du spectacle. Nous nous élançons alors dans la cour et revêtons notre costume. L'espace dans lequel nous évoluons, qui constituera la scène de la représentation, semble démesurément grand comparativement aux scènes de théâtre que nous avons l'habitude de côtoyer. Celle-là comprend l'espace des *Colonnes de Buren*, ainsi qu'une deuxième cour située à l'arrière (la Galerie d'Orléans) dans laquelle se trouve une fontaine. Nous pouvons accéder à tout l'espace des *Colonnes de Buren*, ce qui inclut (lorsque l'on entre par la place Colette) la Galerie de Chartres sur la gauche, la Galerie de la Cour d'honneur — qui sépare les Colonnes de la Galerie d'Orléans — et la Galerie des Proues sur la droite (voir Figure 1).



1. Plan du Domaine du Palais Royal : 1. Ministère de la Culture, 2. Conseil Constitutionnel, 3. Conseil d'État, 4. Comédie Française, 5. Théâtre Éphémère, 6. Colonnes de Buren, 7. Théâtre du Palais-Royal.
Crédits. Paris 16 — Own work — Map data from OpenStreetMap, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Rappelons ici que les *Colonnes de Buren* sont l'œuvre de Daniel Buren, dont le nom officiel est *Les Deux Plateaux*. Le premier plateau est visible de plain-pied. C'est celui sur lequel nous marchons. Le second est situé en sous-sol, et nous l'apercevons à travers les grilles réparties sur le sol du premier plateau. Lorsque nous pénétrons dans l'enceinte du Palais-Royal, nous pénétrons ainsi doublement dans une œuvre d'art. Ce lieu est à la fois une sculpture *in situ*[1] et l'espace de jeu d'une pièce de théâtre. La notion de théâtre immersif prend ici tout son sens : nous nous retrouvons immergés dans la pièce, de toute part (voir Figure 2).



2. Isabelle (Marjorie Dubus) et le Duc (Mathias Marty)
au milieu des *Colonnes de Buren*.
Crédits. Matthieu Camille Colin.

Deux immenses bannières ont été disposées dans l'espace de jeu. La première se trouve à gauche de l'entrée, le long de la Galerie de Chartres. La seconde a été accrochée sur le mur de droite (mur intérieur de l'actuel Conseil d'État). Ces affiches ont deux fonctions. D'une part, elles permettent de placarder un décret sur la peste, contexte essentiel de *Mesure pour Mesure*, et, d'autre part, elles donnent des indications géographiques sur les différents espaces de jeu. Nous apprenons donc que le Palais Ducal se trouve au fond à gauche de la Galerie d'Orléans, que la Chapelle se trouve au niveau de l'entrée de la Place Colette, la prison au niveau de la Galerie des Proues, et le Cabaret au milieu de la Galerie de la Cour d'honneur.

Quelques éléments de décors et quelques accessoires ont été installés. Les décors doivent être démontés et remontés chaque jour en une trentaine de minutes : il n'était donc pas possible pour la troupe d'avoir des décors trop imposants. Un coffre a été disposé dans le Palais Ducal, une chaise de prière dans la chapelle, face à un autel recouvert d'un drap rouge. Il y a également un jeu d'échecs dans la prison. De nombreux tapis persans ont été déroulés devant la fontaine située dans la Cour d'Orléans, et, au fond à droite de cette même cour, des draps blancs sont étendus de manière à former une pièce fermée — nous comprendrons dès le début de la pièce qu'il s'agit de la chambre de Claudio et Juliette. Enfin, au niveau du cabaret, divers instruments, pédales d'effet, micros et tables de mixage attendent les musiciens. Des enceintes diffusent un bruit de fond, qui évoque un lieu de vie assez dynamique, avec des discussions, des rires.

Pendant trente minutes, les spectateurs déambulent et errent dans tout cet espace. Ils ont le temps de lire les pancartes, de faire le tour du décor, de se mêler aux autres membres du public, de s'asseoir sur les *Colonnes de Buren*, d'observer les bâtiments qui les entourent, et enfin de découvrir les personnages. Car lorsque le public entre dans le Domaine du Palais-Royal, des personnages sont déjà présents sur la scène. Isabelle erre et regarde le public de loin, les musiciens s'installent, le Geôlier est devant sa prison, etc. Petit à petit, un à un, tous les personnages font leur apparition et vaquent à leurs occupations. La plupart ne parlent pas, pourtant la pièce a déjà pris vie. Nous avons l'impression de pénétrer dans un lieu qui existe et vit en dehors de la représentation, sans que notre présence ne soit nécessaire. Escalus finit par s'approcher de la foule de spectateurs : il leur lit une lettre du maire de Londres exigeant la fermeture des théâtres pour tenter d'éradiquer la peste. S'ensuivent de courtes interactions avec ceux qui l'ont écouté, parfois des applaudissements. Puis Escalus repart. Ce texte est

véridique, insiste Escalus. Il s'agit en effet d'un collage entre une lettre datant de 1597 et une autre de 1546. Le parallèle entre le temps de la pièce et celui de notre réalité est flagrant. La peste vient faire écho à la Covid-19, et les recommandations du maire sont étonnamment proches de celles qui ont rythmé nos vies quelques années plus tôt.

Avant même le début de la pièce de Shakespeare, tous les codes de la pièce immersive sont donnés au public. C'est à eux qu'il revient de se déplacer dans l'espace de la représentation pour aller à la rencontre de l'intrigue, de ses personnages et de ses accessoires. C'est également à eux qu'il revient de décider leur parcours, car, rappelons-le, tout au long de la représentation, chaque membre du public est libre de choisir le personnage qu'il souhaite suivre.

II. Immersif et simultanéité

Le bruit de fond qui émanait du cabaret s'estompe et est remplacé par un son de larsen continu. L'ambiance sonore change. Le Bourreau monte sur une colonne, et s'adresse au public : « Voyageurs, voyageuses… » (voir Figure 3).



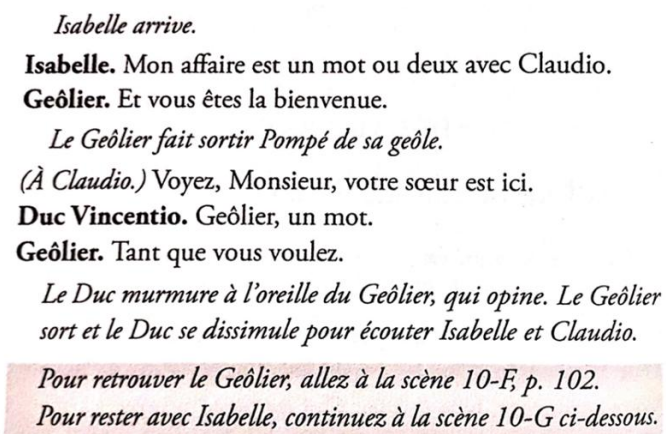
3. Le Bourreau (Maxime Chartier) accueille le public.
Crédits. Matthieu Camille Colin.

Après avoir souhaité la bienvenue dans la ville de Vienne aux voyageurs, il les invite à se placer devant le personnage qui brandit, sur une hallebarde, le même loup que celui qu'ils portent. En quelques instants, le public se répartit en trois groupes. Les personnes venues ensemble se retrouvent séparées ; on leur a volontairement donné des masques différents. Puis le Bourreau donne quelques règles : ne pas parler, ne pas toucher les comédiens. Ces règles ne sont pas

uniquement restrictives : « vous êtes libres de découvrir tous les recoins », rappelle le Bourreau. Comme nous l'avions déjà pressenti lorsque nous découvrions l'espace de jeu, le public ne sera pas passif. Il est maître de son expérience théâtrale. Le Bourreau conclut : « le reste est silence[2] *(le larsen s'interrompt)* … et musique *(les enceintes diffusent une mélodie*) ». Nous entendons siffler un chant de la Renaissance : *Tourdion*[3]. Immédiatement, un groupe de voyageurs se dirige vers la chambre de Claudio et de Juliette. Un autre se rend dans le palais ducal. Le troisième reste devant le cabaret. Soudain nous entendons un cri : c'est Juliette. Claudio vient de se faire arrêter sous ses yeux. Au même instant dans le Palais Ducal, le Duc Vincentio commence sa première réplique et explique son plan à Escalus. Du côté du cabaret, des personnages (Pompé, Mme Surfoutue, Givré, Moudugenou) qui s'étaient amassés les uns sur les autres, formant une espèce de créature, se redressent petit à petit et se mettent à chanter : « Quand je bois du vin clairet … ». Cette simultanéité, si emblématique du théâtre immersif, sera un élément constitutif de toute la représentation.

Pendant une heure et demie, les scènes s'enchaînent et se superposent. Tout a été minutieusement pensé pour que les passages s'emboîtent et se succèdent sans accros. Des personnages traversent *Les Deux Plateaux* en courant. On discute, on complote, une tête est tranchée, une femme (Isabelle) agressée. C'est une effervescence continue. Personne n'entre et ne sort de « scène ». Et il nous suffit de tourner la tête pour apercevoir une autre scène se dérouler quelques mètres plus loin. C'est bien simple : où que nous regardions, il se passe toujours quelque chose.

Côté public, chacun se déplace au gré de ses envies. Tandis que certains décident de suivre le Duc déguisé en moine qui discute avec Frère Pierre, d'autres ne lâchent pas les semelles d'Isabelle tandis qu'elle tente de convaincre Angelo d'épargner son frère Claudio. Ci-dessous (voir Figure 4), une page de la version papier de la pièce, publiée *a posteriori*, qui met en lumière cette prise de décision continuelle du public.



Isabelle arrive.

Isabelle. Mon affaire est un mot ou deux avec Claudio.

Geôlier. Et vous êtes la bienvenue.

Le Geôlier fait sortir Pompé de sa geôle.

(À Claudio.) Voyez, Monsieur, votre sœur est ici.

Duc Vincentio. Geôlier, un mot.

Geôlier. Tant que vous voulez.

Le Duc murmure à l'oreille du Geôlier, qui opine. Le Geôlier sort et le Duc se dissimule pour écouter Isabelle et Claudio.

Pour retrouver le Geôlier, allez à la scène 10-F, p. 102.
Pour rester avec Isabelle, continuez à la scène 10-G ci-dessous.

4. Extrait de *Le Fléau*, Léonard Matton.
Crédits. *L'avant-scène théâtre*, 2024 (p. 80).

Du fait de la simultanéité, la comédie prend une part plus importante dans *Le Fléau* que dans le texte de Shakespeare. Tandis qu'Isabelle est confrontée à un dilemme insoutenable, d'autres personnages tels que Pompé et Mme Surfoutue[4] restent dans le champ de la comédie, spatialement matérialisé par l'espace du bordel. En théâtre immersif, il n'y a plus d'alternance entre sérieux et oisiveté, mais concomitance. Léonard Matton a donc dû ajouter quelques

scènes comiques pour « occuper » les personnages entre deux scènes écrites dans le texte original. Le public pourra, par exemple, être témoin de la vente aux enchères d'une prostituée, orchestrée par Givré et Mme Surfoutue. Il pourra, d'ailleurs, prendre part à cette scène en faisant grimper les enchères. Et puis, du côté de la prison, une longue scène a été conçue entre le Geôlier et son nouvel assistant, Pompé. Au cours de cette scène loufoque, les deux personnages ont d'abord une longue discussion pour tenter de déterminer lequel des deux a un métier acceptable. Puis ils s'entraînent à couper des têtes. Le public est là encore mis à contribution et leur sert de cobaye.

III. S'immerger dans la pièce

Les « spect-acteurs » de Léonard Matton (voir *supra*) sont à la lisière entre l'acteur et le spectateur. Et, en effet, lorsque nous assistons à cette représentation, nous sommes sur la scène, aux côtés des comédiens (voir Figure 5). Même si nous n'avons pas l'autorisation de leur parler, ceux-ci nous regardent et interagissent avec nous. Il arrive même, parfois, qu'ils nous effleurent ou nous prennent par la main. Nous nous sentons donc d'autant plus investis et concernés par ce qui se trame sous nos yeux. L'histoire, lorsqu'elle se joue à un mètre de nous, nous atteint et nous touche d'une tout autre manière.



5. Le public masqué se tient tout près des personnages du *Fléau* (ici Jean-Baptiste Barbier-Arribe).
Crédits. Matthieu Camille Colin.

Une relation particulière se noue entre le lieu et la pièce. Lorsque Angelo parle des lois de la ville de Vienne, il se trouve à quelques mètres du Conseil Constitutionnel. Les époques se répondent. Les bâtiments du XVII^{e} siècle — associés à l'art contemporain de Buren — entrent en résonance avec le vers shakespearien. Vecteur d'authenticité, le Domaine du Palais-Royal procure également un cadre urbain et réaliste à la pièce. L'intrigue se joue en extérieur, presque dans la rue. Si le public doit faire l'effort d'imaginer qu'il se trouve à Vienne au XVI^{e} siècle, le décor grandeur nature dans lequel il évolue lui facilite la tâche. Il n'y a parfois qu'un pas entre le décor de cinéma et la scène de théâtre immersif. Jusqu'à la fin de la représentation, l'adaptation joue avec le cadre patrimonial. À la fin de l'Acte V, lorsque Angelo apprend qu'il a été dupé, Marianne apparaît sur la passerelle au-dessus de la Galerie de la Cour d'honneur, à quelques dizaines de mètres de haut. Cette révélation, qui apporte une nouvelle dimension à l'intrigue pour le personnage d'Angelo (et ceux qui l'auraient suivi), est physiquement représentée par cette passerelle surélevée. La mise en espace de la pièce joue formidablement sur la verticalité.

La musique fait enfin partie intégrante de cette représentation. Les musiciens du cabaret jouent en direct durant toute la pièce. Ils sont, à plusieurs reprises, rejoints par des personnages, venus chanter ou jouer quelques notes. Cette ambiance sonore nous plonge encore davantage dans le monde du *Fléau*. Nous sommes envahis, de manière aussi bien visuelle que sonore, par l'intrigue de la pièce. Le choix des instruments est particulièrement intéressant : un savant mélange a été opéré entre instruments de la Renaissance et matériel de musique contemporain. Des flûtes renaissance sont ainsi accompagnées par des guitares électriques et un synthétiseur à table d'onde. Plus surprenant encore : l'usage d'une mandoline électrique, qui incarne ce pont entre les époques. La superposition des époques se transmet tout autant par le lieu que par la musique.

IV. Porter la voix des femmes

Si l'intrigue de *Mesure pour Mesure* semblait parfois faire écho à notre réalité, l'adaptation qu'en propose Léonard Matton dans *Le Fléau* force le trait. La question de la place de la femme et de sa voix est au cœur de la pièce. Matton va plus loin que Shakespeare, mettant en scène une agression sexuelle à l'encontre d'Isabelle (voir Figure 6). Cette dernière ne fait pas que *subir* les avances d'Angelo, puisque celui-ci finira par la prendre dans ses bras de force pour ce qui s'apparente très nettement à une tentative de viol. La question d'Angelo, « Qui te croira, Isabelle ? », prend une tout autre ampleur, puisqu'elle vient ici répondre à une situation que nous ne connaissons que trop aujourd'hui : celle d'une femme agressée dont on n'écoute et ne croit pas le témoignage.



6. La Garde de dos (Florianne Delahousse) et de face Isabelle (Marjorie Dubus) et Angelo (Thomas Gendronneau).
Crédits. Matthieu Camille Colin.

La scène de vente d'une prostituée vient mettre en lumière d'autres figures féminines, elles aussi victimes. Le parallèle est rendu encore plus troublant par la participation du public : tandis que certains acceptent de jouer le jeu des enchères, d'autres refusent catégoriquement de participer à cette entreprise. Les valeurs du XXI^{e} siècle entrent en confrontation avec celles du XVII^{e} siècle. Point d'orgue de cette (re)prise de pouvoir par les femmes, Isabelle n'accepte pas de rejoindre le Duc à la tête de Vienne à la fin de la pièce — contrairement à la façon dont la pièce de Shakespeare se termine. Le pouvoir, symbolisé par une clé qui avait été remise à

Angelo au début de la représentation, est confié à Isabelle, qui l'accepte et salue. La musique s'arrête, et les « voyageurs » applaudissent.

Notes

[1] Lien vers le site internet de Daniel Buren : **URL**.

[2] Allusion à la dernière réplique d'Hamlet avant qu'il ne meure. Son précédent spectacle, *Helsingør*, débute avec ce même vers.

[3] Version assez proche de celle de la représentation, au même tempo : **URL**.

[4] Léonard Matton a écrit sa propre traduction des pièces de Shakespeare qu'il adapte.

Chloé Giroud

Chloé Giroud est agrégée d'anglais et doctorante en troisième année à l'Université Grenoble — Alpes. Elle prépare une thèse en théâtre et littérature anglophone sous la direction d'Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, intitulée : « S'immerger dans Shakespeare : Nouvelles modalités de jeu au 21e siècle en France ». Elle s'intéresse en particulier au théâtre immersif, et travaille en étroite collaboration avec Léonard Matton. Sa recherche a déjà donné lieu à deux publications (Presses Universitaires de Nanterre 2023 et *L'avant-Scène Théâtre* 2024), ainsi qu'à trois communications.

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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

Les Shakespeare immersifs de Léonard Matton, récit d'une aventure prometteuse

Volet 3. *La Nuit des Rois* en immersion à Grenoble

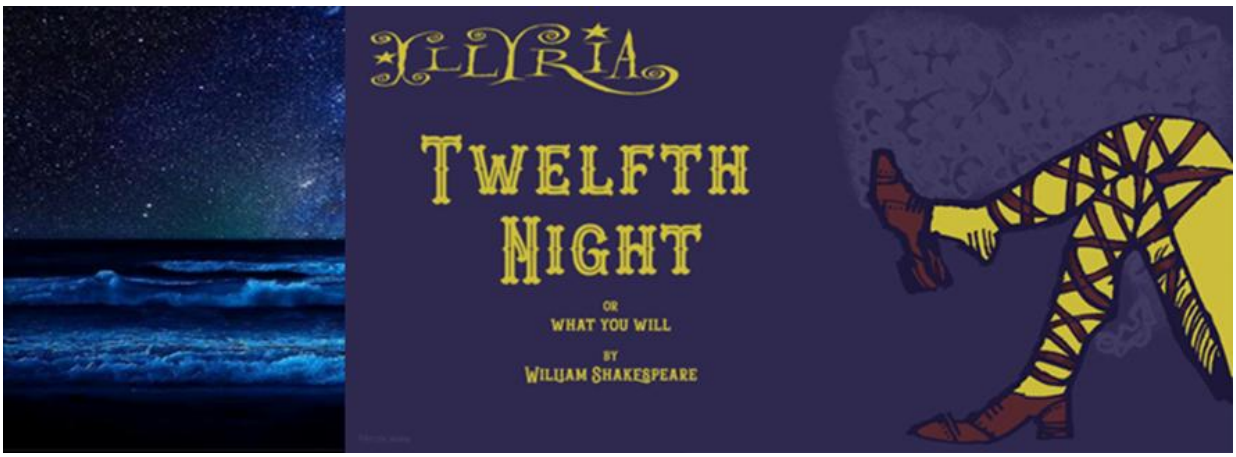
Projet de co-création

Par Estelle Rivier-Arnaud et Chloé Giroud
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1. Photo montage du projet Nuit.
Crédits. Estelle Rivier-Arnaud.

L'aventure de l'immersif avec Shakespeare se poursuit, et c'est une chance. Il apparaît en effet que l'absence de quatrième mur invitant à l'engagement participatif de chacun au sein de l'espace de représentation (qui n'est pas sans rappeler l'espace à ciel ouvert des théâtres en rond de la première modernité) est particulièrement adaptée à cette dramaturgie. Aussi, à la suite de sa venue le 1er décembre 2023 dans le cadre d'une journée d'étude dédiée à *Hamlet* au programme de l'agrégation d'anglais[1], Léonard Matton soumet le projet d'élaborer une collaboration entre sa compagnie, l'Université et la ville de Grenoble. Il est alors envisagé de créer *La Nuit des rois,* pièce sur laquelle sera engagé un travail dramaturgique et d'adaptation en théâtre immersif avec les étudiants et les enseignants-chercheurs de l'Université Grenoble-Alpes (UGA). Dans sa phase première, le projet inclura une série d'ateliers de réflexion sur la dramaturgie de la pièce (traduction et modalités d'adaptation, étude des publics et de la contemporanéité de la pièce) et une pratique artistique (travail au plateau, répétitions, mise en espace et interprétation avec une distribution étudiante et professionnelle). Dans sa seconde phase, une restitution publique de *La Nuit des rois* sera présentée en théâtre immersif ainsi que la mise en scène de la pièce dans son intégralité par la compagnie A2R[2], avec laquelle Léonard Matton collabore.

C'est ainsi que débute le projet « Nuit » en septembre 2024 à l'Université de Grenoble-Alpes, avec un ensemble d'ateliers proposés aux étudiants de Licence et de Master d'Anglais et d'Arts du Spectacle, ainsi que des ateliers de traduction et de travail au plateau. À raison d'une séance à deux mensuelles, le texte est découpé et adapté aux exigences de l'espace sans frontières, de la juxtaposition temporelle et actantielle, enfin d'une communauté d'acteurs et de « spect-acteurs ».





2 & 3. Interventions de Léonard Matton en Licence 3e année et Master LLCER, UGA, 4 et 21 octobre et 2024.
Crédits. Estelle Rivier-Arnaud et Ari Ward.

Bien que se déroulant principalement dans les divers bâtiments et les sites extérieurs que propose le campus, divers publics vont être amenés à participer à la création de ce nouveau projet immersif : les lycéens guidés par leurs enseignantes — Mme Nathalie Robert-Jurado (également doctorante à l'UGA) et Mme Perrine Cadic (professeure de théâtre) au Lycée Pierre du Terrail, à Pontcharra, et les élèves du CLEPT par le biais de Mme Fiona Leyrit), certains étudiants musicologues, un ou plusieurs membres du Chœur universitaire, des élèves du Conservatoire de théâtre et des étudiants-acteurs qui seront distribués dans les rôles. Des enseignants-chercheurs issus d'autres universités — Marie Nadia Karsky, de l'Université de Paris 8, et Jean-Louis Claret, de l'Université d'Aix-Marseille — travailleront dans les ateliers dramaturgiques et contribueront à l'illustration des différents événements. Le projet accueille également deux étudiants en stage Master, Nicolas Jegou et Ari Ward, qui ont construit le site internet et qui l'alimentent, tout en s'investissant dans la communication avec divers partenaires. Le projet s'inscrit notamment dans les préoccupations culturelles de la Ville de Grenoble qui est d'ouvrir le théâtre à un public large et surtout néophyte. En 2025, la restitution *in situ* de morceaux choisis de la traduction conclura l'année civile lors d'un colloque dédié à *La Nuit des rois* au programme des concours de l'agrégation d'anglais 2025 et 2026. Il a reçu pour cela le soutien de la Société Française Shakespeare, mais également de nombreux pôles financiers, pédagogiques et scientifiques de l'Université : les UFR, la commission culture, les laboratoires ILCEA4 et Litt&Arts, les H3S. Le dossier est encore à l'étude dans les programmes de recherche-création et de certaines associations ou sociétés savantes, mais il bénéficie déjà du soutien de la majorité, ce qui le situe en bonne place dans la « promesse » de poursuivre « l'aventure » du théâtre immersif en France.

I. Un projet grenoblois

L'intrigue de *La Nuit des rois* se situe en Illyrie, quelque part entre une plage, le palais de la comtesse Olivia et celui du Duc Orsino. Entre ces derniers, l'amour est à sens unique, et il faut le concours de Viola, séparée de son jumeau lors d'un naufrage et dont elle épouse les traits sous la figure de Cesario, pour que les unions se fassent … quoique de façon inattendue. En parallèle, Sir Toby (l'oncle d'Olivia) et ses acolytes complotent contre Malvolio (secret amoureux éconduit

de la comtesse) qu'ils jugent obséquieux et méprisable. Et pendant ce temps, Sébastien, le frère de Viola, cherche son chemin avec l'aide du capitaine Antonio. Ces enchevêtrements d'intrigue se prêtent particulièrement à un espace multiple, ouvert sur la nature florale et marine sur fond vallonné et onirique. En un mot : l'Isère. Aux « spectateurs » de faire leurs propres choix de narration, de se connecter, à travers le récit, à la nature, et d'éprouver une intimité directe avec les personnages shakespeariens.

S'inscrivant dans la démarche de Léonard Matton, lequel aime lier territoire et théâtre dans ses représentations, la restitution finale de la traduction devrait se dérouler au Musée Dauphinois. Situé au bord de l'Isère et en plein cœur de Grenoble, sur la montée dite de « La Bastille », un des lieux emblématiques du territoire isérois. Le Musée permettra de jouer avec les différents éléments de décors induits dans *La Nuit des Rois*. Le fleuve (l'Isère) pourra par exemple signifier la mer, d'où arrivent les naufragés, à l'Acte 1. En outre, le site du Musée — un ancien couvent — comprend un cloître en son centre où désormais des sculptures étranges figurent. Il sert aux expositions et aux installations en tous genres. L'association de l'architecture ancienne et de l'art contemporain invite à la transposition de l'intrigue shakespearienne dans un ailleurs indéfini qui entrecroise les rôles (acteurs et spectateurs) et les styles (les visages fardés des comédiens et ceux masqués des visiteurs.) C'est un lieu idéal pour y faire vivre au plus près la juxtaposition des intrigues en plusieurs endroits de l'édifice sur fond de décor naturel.



4. Le Musée dauphinois au bord de l'Isère, jonché sur les pentes de la Bastille.
Crédits. Le café des Alpes.

II. Finalités escomptées

Ce projet devrait ainsi permettre d'avoir un suivi unique du travail de création d'une œuvre immersive en France — processus auquel personne n'a encore eu accès — depuis son commencement (l'adaptation textuelle) jusqu'à sa finalité (sa mise en jeu). Les observations collectées seront précieuses car elles contribueront à une meilleure connaissance de cette forme de théâtre, si appropriée semble-t-il au théâtre de Shakespeare. Des archives seront créées à cet effet (dans le cadre des stages Master). On s'attachera à montrer que l'expérience immersive permet de rendre compte de la contemporanéité du répertoire anglais de la première modernité. L'ensemble des activités menées au cours de ces deux années est ainsi l'occasion de proposer une nouvelle façon d'aborder les thématiques de ce répertoire, mais

aussi d'en exprimer le dynamisme et la popularité — d'où l'implication de publics divers (universitaires, étudiants, chercheurs, lycéens), de collaborations multiples, de croisements des arts et des méthodes d'analyse. Les publications pour un large public (*L'avant-scène théâtre* envisagée pour la traduction et *Shakespeare en devenir* 2026 pour les actes du colloque) constitueront un maillon important dans cette démonstration.

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Notes

[1] Co-organisation Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, Charlène Cruxent et Chloé Giroud.

[2] La compagnie « A2R — Antre de Rêves » a été créée en 2003 par Roch-Antoine Albaladéjo, qui en est aujourd'hui le directeur artistique. Elle travaille en association avec Léonard Matton, et se donne pour mission de créer un « Théâtre pour Tous, à la fois populaire et exigeant ». La

compagnie, domiciliée en Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, a monté une quinzaine de spectacles, adaptant aussi bien des pièces de Molière que des textes de Flaubert. Elle a aussi produit des créations originales telles que « H.P.N.S. — Marché pirate sur le darknet » (2022). Pour plus d'informations, voir : **URL**.

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Estelle Rivier-Arnaud est Professeur en Études anglophones à l'Université Grenoble — Alpes. Spécialiste du théâtre, en particulier de l'adaptation du texte à la scène, elle a publié articles et ouvrages à ce sujet, le plus souvent en collaboration avec des professionnels de la scène. Elle participe actuellement à plusieurs projets collaboratifs de recherche-création, *The Gut Girls,* Sarah Daniels (L'Harmattan, 2025), *The Lifeblood,* Glyn Maxwell (PUM, 2026), et « Nuit » d'après *La Nuit des rois,* William Shakespeare. Sa dernière monographie, *The Reinvention of Hamlet by Our Contemporaries: Excavating The Unknown* est à paraître.

Chloé Giroud

Chloé Giroud est agrégée d'anglais et doctorante en troisième année à l'Université Grenoble — Alpes. Elle prépare une thèse en théâtre et littérature anglophone sous la direction d'Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, intitulée : « S'immerger dans Shakespeare : Nouvelles modalités de jeu au 21e siècle en France ». Elle s'intéresse en particulier au théâtre immersif, et travaille en étroite collaboration avec Léonard Matton. Sa recherche a déjà donné lieu à deux publications (Presses Universitaires de Nanterre 2023 et *L'avant-Scène Théâtre* 2024), ainsi qu'à trois communications.

Crédits et mentions légales

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