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Gender changes – “the bias of the world”?

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1 Due to professional gender restrictions, casting women was illegal on the early modern stage and boys portrayed female characters. In today's theatre, roles are mostly cast according to the binary gender of characters, but female actors raise their voice to claim these parts that are often restricted to male actors. If traditional "legitimate" casting – even today – is equal to binary "cis male" actors for male parts, then transformations of these gender constellations allow for fascinating staging opportunities, for example, as Judith Butler would seem to confirm, "a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position".[1] Changes in conservative casting on the contemporary stage can demonstrate different facets of political, cultural, and gender issues.

2 Casting Philip of Faulconbridge, the illegitimate son of Richard Coeur-de-Lion in *King John* with a female actor questions gender identity and political implications. Simultaneously, it raises awareness towards hierarchies in the acting business and demands readings of female empowerment as it addresses the representation of "legitimacy". This article will therefore question "male legitimacy" and present its subversion: disruptive casting concepts that are based on traditional, sometimes sexist, preconceptions via gender-conscious casting, concentrating on Faulconbridge as a case study: indeed, the bastard Philip has recently been cast with women, e.g. Pippa Nixon in the RSC's 2012 production in Stratford-upon-Avon, Kate Eastwood Norris at the Folger Library, Washington D. C., and Lisa Pohlers at Brotfabrik, Bonn, both in 2018. Such revolutionary castings of the illegitimate "Other" via a gender-conscious role swaps on the contemporary stage can demonstrate a certain fluidity in gender representation

[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. xxvii-xxviii.

and target different political and social issues, and it “smacks […] something of the policy” (II.1.396).[2] This chapter will give a very brief introduction on cross-dressing on stage, then target the illegitimacy of Philip illuminated via the above-mentioned three stage adaptations, and lastly analyse the effect of these casting choices, illuminating how they might refer to a receptive twenty-first century audience.

Cross-dressing

3 “Playing the opposite sex is as old as theatre,”[3] and young male actors apprenticed at theatres by playing female roles on the early modern stage. Gender changes were easily envisioned through the changing into female gear. An emphasis on clothes in creating gender was not only a theatrical phenomenon: in fact, as Will Fisher argues, clothing was seen as essential to a person’s identity in early modern culture, and not inferior to corporeal signs that materialise gender.[4] Donning male clothes makes the female characters appear like men: “Clothing is the major symbol […] to immediately identify the individual's gender role.”[5] As Philipp Stubbes in his 1583 *Anatomie of Abuses* asserts:

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[2] William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John* [1954], ed. E.A.J. Honigman, London, Bloomsbury, 2007.

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

[4] *Cf.* Will Fisher, *Materialising Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, diverse chapters.

[5] Vern L. Bullough & Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 312.

> Apparel was given us as a sign distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to wear the apparel of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the merits of his own kinde.[6]

4 Jean E. Howard explains that, as such, "cross-dressing, 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".[7] Puritanical critics also highlighted the licentiousness of the theatre outside the city bounds as a place of cheap und ungodly entertainment; this would argue for the theatre as a transgressive space against the "divinely sanctioned social order".[8] However, actors – dressing as pretended characters – might be interpreted as confirming status and existing gender norms. Then, Howard weighs in, "female cross-dressing on the stage is not a strong site of resistance to the period's patriarchal sex-gender system".[9] Yet theatre, automatically – because of its professional pretending –, means instinctive subversion of social and gender norms.

5 The theatre certainly caused dissension: cross-dressing was considered supposedly transgressive and androgynous dresses were extensively debated, also in the controversial pamphlets *Hic*

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[6] Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* [1583], Boston: De Capo Press, 1972, p. F5 quoted in: Laura Levine, "Men in Women's Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642", *Criticism*, vol. 28, 1986, p. 133-134.

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

[8] *Ibid*., p. 422.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 439.

Mulier and *Haec Vir*.[10] Different “types of transvestism prevailed: that which violated the boundaries of gender demarcation and that which violated class hierarchy”.[11] Both – a confusion of the sexes, and a subversion of class – happened in the theatre; this in turn might become problematic for the stability of society. A provocative freedom of the theatre was not only highly entertaining but also a branch of business, a “commercial venture”.[12] Along these lines, Laura Levine argues that “an all-male acting troupe was the natural and unremarkable product of a culture whose conception of gender was ‘teleologically male’”; she also suggests that contemporary protests against the practise – believing it made young actors “effeminate” – reflected societal fears about an unstable self that needed to be strictly controlled by rules.[13] This early modern conflict highlights a consistent underlying fear of instability. Disruption of rules and norms of apparel thus can mean social disruption: not just a signal of, but of real disorder. To consider an example: If a good woman was to be silent and chaste, a domestic, obedient being, Jean E. Howard ponders the following issue:

> Do [cross-dressed males] present constructions of woman that challenge her subordinate place in the Renaissance sex-gender system and so, perhaps, lead to the transformation of that system? [...] They contain, they vitiate, challenges posed to masculine authority and the traditional gender hierarchy by

[10] *Cf.* Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1983, p. 156.

[11] Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women,* London, Routledge, 1999, p. 33.

[12] Jean E. Howard, *art. cit*., p. 440.

[13] *Cf.* Laura Levine, “Men in Women’s Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642”, *Criticism*, vol. 28, 1986, p. 122.

> wealthy women, by unmarried women, by women with voices.[14]

6 Against this, treatises like the above-mentioned *Hic Mulier* saw a need for the re-establishment of social norms and boundaries: binaries for men in contrast to women to establish themselves as something higher. Subordination creates hierarchy; it affirms power structures. The question at hand then must be phrased thus: Whose voice is heard, when, in Shakespeare, the female roles cross-dress again and turn into – sometimes vociferous – men like Rosalind's Ganymede in *As you like it*? Who is publicly speaking? Who is given a licence to speak if plays like *Twelfth Night* were written for the Christmas days of celebration, topsy-turviness and carnival?

7 Casting restrictions of the early modern age were soon overcome; female actors have been allowed on the professional stage since 1660 and there is a history of how and when the practice of casting female actors has developed. Cross-casting also appeared the other way around: Women played boys, like Peter Pan, and young men, like the hesitant Hamlet, the "more stereotypically feminine"[15] of Shakespeare's male protagonists, on the nineteenth-century stage. "Female impersonation, which had been declining since women had been allowed to appear as themselves on the legitimate stage in the XVIIth century, made a comeback in the nineteenth century"[16] in the form of transvestite comedians or today's pantomime etc. Yet, Halberstam criticises that "this role reversal actually masks the asymmetry of male and female impersonation. If boys can play girls

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[14] Jean E. Howard, *art. cit*., p. 430; *Cf.* also p. 425.

[15] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests. Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York/London, Routledge, 1992, p. 38.

[16] Vern L. Bullough & Bonnie Bullough, *op. cit*., p. 232.

and women, but women can play only boys, mature masculinity once again remains an authentic property of adult male bodies while all other gender roles are available for interpretation”.[17] They highlight that we still have an imbalance as far as opportunities are concerned. What happens then if a role is interpreted as female? Bullough & Bullough also add that

> cross-gender casting […] provided an opportunity for women vicariously to have the sort of mythic adventures many desired to have but which were denied by the gender conventions of the day. It allowed […] to explore sexual boundaries […], but it was never so realistic that it threatened the males in the audience.[18]

8 This would imply that art may suggest anything.

9 Some critics argue that Shakespeare’s characters are “suspended between male and female”,[19] that Shakespeare’s plays are replete with cross-dressing and gender-bending.[20] Virginia Woolf in her ground-breaking feminist work *A Room of One’s Own* calls on Shakespeare’s androgyny; she concludes that he understood what it means to be human – not the one or the other. Shapiro states that “[b]ecause of our own fascination with sexual identity and gender roles, contemporary scholarship has devoted considerable attention

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[17] Judith/Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 233.

[18] Vern L. Bullough & Bonnie Bullough, *op. cit*., p. 227.

[19] Marjorie Garber, *op. cit*., p. 39.

[20] *Cf.* Sarah Hemming, “The cross-gender casting of great Shakespearean characters”, *Financial Times*, 2014. URL. Accessed 5 November 2020.

to various forms of cross-dressing"[21] and 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".[22] This is also acknowledged by the theatre industry when, for example, the director Simon Godwin explains that the "solution [...] lies in offering parts that are traditionally played by men to women. By doing that, you, in fact, discover that Shakespeare was really interested in what's humane, what's universal."[23]

10 Cross-casting roles offers new perspectives, including an approach towards gender fluidity on the contemporary stage. This does not signify equality between the sexes, as, mostly, roles are still cast according to the binary genders of characters, and with regard to Shakespeare, that means less than 20% to women. Additionally, most of these female roles are under the age of forty years, which can be further restrictive. Casting choices make the difference: Shakespeare's plays are intended to be performed; stage adaptations always include the visual. Spectators see whether male actors are playing female roles as they used to on the early modern stage – or the other way around. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."[24] As the theatre is

[21] Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 1.

[22] Clare McManus, "Shakespeare and Gender: The Woman's Part", BL 2016. URL. Accessed 6 November 2020.

[23] Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), "Women playing male roles". URL. Accessed 13 June 2023.

[24] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), London, Penguin, 1990, p. 8.

always about impersonations,[25] spectators see how characters interact. An audience looks at actors as they speak the verse; they look at the stage and how the characters move and create dynamics.

11 In the more recent past, some acting companies have professed gender-blind casting, choosing the best actor for a role notwithstanding their sex. However, there is criticism against this practice by those who argue that gender-blind casting is neither truly possible nor really desirable as it negates the visibility aspect of the audience and therefore could lead to more marginalisation. So even when a director professes to being ‘blind’ to gender, the audience will not be. Castings can underline the fluidity of gender and highlight the strength of character – and acting talent. Anti-conservative, non-male casting choices are new interpretations themselves, and Maxine Peake’s Hamlet at Manchester Corn Exchange in 2015 discovered relevance in a different way of telling the story. At this stage, it therefore matters to allow a woman in a male role. Prolific acting companies now swap gender: An increasing amount of minor, male roles are often played by women. Yet, there are a few lighthouses that aim for equality. In the recent *Troilus and Cressida* performed by the RSC, there was a 50-50 gender split. Director Erica Whyman explains: “It is about two things needing to come together. I do care very much about representation of women on stage. I don’t want our audiences to feel like all our greatest plays are about men, because that genuinely is alienating.”[26] *Doctor Who*’s thirteenth Doctor Jodie Whittaker told *Radio Times* of her hopes that, in the future, a female actor “in a traditionally male role won’t be so exciting – […] [or] to

[25] *Cf.* Marjorie Garber, *op. cit*., p. 40.

[26] RSC, *op. cit*.

have this sort of parity. […] Stories shouldn't always be told from the same perspective".[27] Hamlet has often been played by women, but the matter centres on other major roles. The audience does notice a disproportion and director Simon Godwin idealises that re-gendering at some point in time might not have "additional significance"[28] but this is not the case yet.

12 In fact, important, major roles have been given to women since the end of the twentieth century. Seana McKenna played Julius Caesar at the Canadian Stratford Festival. Seeing women in positions of power on stage, in roles traditionally given to men, sends an important message, she said.[29] The late Martha Henry, Prospero, accounted that playing a male lead role would "never have entered her head" when she was young.[30] Now, there are Helen Mirren as Prospero; Harriet Walter as Brutus; Marianne Hoppe and Glenda Jackson as King Lear; Tamsin Greig as Malvolio. The biggest roles in Shakespeare's canon – Hamlet, Lear, Prospero, Richard III – are all male but over the years leading female actors have been cast in these parts and have thus rebelled against convention. Fiona Shaw describes playing Richard II as a chance to measure herself against some of the greatest poetry in drama, not against men, but with words: "The pleasure of being allowed to speak these wonderfully

[27] Ellie Harrison, "New Doctor Who star Jodie Whittaker: 'It's a mistake to think that the only heroes are white men'", *Radio Times*, n. p.

[28] RSC, *op. cit*.

[29] Alice Hopton, "Stratford Festival tackles gender by casting women in lead male roles", 2018. URL. Accessed 17 March 2020.

[30] *Idem*.

empowering speeches is something many female actors never get near,”[31] she says.

13 New acting opportunities have opened, and other ways of interrogating gender has been experimented on: Bridge Theatre changed the texts of Oberon and Titania so *she* dominates the magic and *he* falls in love with a donkey. This does not always meet positive reactions only: “When Janet McTeer, playing a macho Petruchio in an all-female *Taming of the Shrew* at Shakespeare’s Globe in 2003, adopted bullish mannerisms (sitting legs apart, peeing against a column), the very incongruity of it was both funny and shocking.”[32] This was by some critics charged as incongruous. Was there, in the audience, a fear of homosexual undercurrents?[33] Does female casting go against heteronormativity? Is a woman in a man’s role a sexual subversion? When casting women in male roles, the question arises whether these women are portraying female or male, diverse, androgynous, or otherwise gender non-conforming people on stage. Clothes might manifest a leaning towards one of the binary sexes, “but there are other symbols as well, including mannerisms, gait, occupational choice, and sexual orientation.”[34] These further indications can direct the interpretation of an otherwise gender-fluid character. Gender-conscious casting offers perspectives.

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[31] Sarah Hemming, “The cross-gender casting of great Shakespearean characters”, *Financial Times*, 2014. URL. Accessed 5 November 2020.

[32] *Idem*.

[33] *Cf.* Richard Hornby, *op. cit*., p. 642.

[34] Vern L. Bullough & Bonnie Bullough, *op. cit*., p. 312.

Philip, the Bastard in *King John*

14 An *illegitimate* child in the early modern era was considered an *Other* due to their hybridity,[35] expressed through a non-normative, transgressive sexuality; the disruptive energy they embody was believed to originate in the sexual drive that led to their conception. The bastard personifies the subversive circumstances of his conception in "the monstrous unkindness of his nature".[36] These attributes qualify them as villains: they are figures of chaos and anarchy. Illegitimate children went against the accepted convention, "inimical to traditional Elizabethan order",[37] and their existence was surrounded by superstitious fears and denial. They represented the danger of sexual indiscretion and thus social transgression, a challenge to order.[38] They were described as undermining the system, separate from cultural norms and civilisation, natural children, lusty and rebellious. Bastards play a crucial role in the politics of Shakespeare's dramas. Their contributions to diplomacy are often decisive for the development of the plot and Shakespeare certainly addresses their status with questions of upward social mobility. As a personification of irregularity in society, the bastard can be a possible vehicle to express social criticism; bastards often figure as commentators on

[35] *Cf.* Andrea Bartl & Stephanie Catani, "Bastard – Figurationen des Hybriden zwischen Ausgrenzung und Entgrenzung. Eine Einleitung" in Andrea Bartl & Stephanie Catani (eds.), *Bastard – Figurationen des Hybriden zwischen Ausgrenzung und Entgrenzung*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2010, p. 12.

[36] Michael Neill, "'In everything illegitimate': imagining the bastard in Renaissance drama", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 23, 1993, p. 272.

[37] David Bevington, "King Lear", in Hardin Craig (ed.), *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Glenview, Foresman, 1973, p. 982.

[38] Michael Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

law or religion. This places them in a position where they can evaluate the society they are excluded from.[39] It is this function of vehicle for an author’s opinion that might also affect new interpretations of Philipp in *King John*.

15 Bastard children like Philip in *King John* are anarchical, “dangerous social outsider[s]”,[40] and they constitute a marginal group; yet they nevertheless influence staged politics. The “deviant”, “mysterious”[41] bastard offers wide opportunities: the bastard can be an attractive, charismatic character, active, and intelligent. If illegitimacy today is not the main factor of social belonging and wedlock not a path to legitimacy anymore, then how can bastardy be something of the *Other* on stage which an audience will recognise when watching a play performed? Casting choices can be affected by social assumptions and gender presuppositions and the illegitimate character on the playhouse stage addresses the performative aspect of bastardy. If legitimate, conservative casting is equal to *male*, then the transformation of the illegitimate bastard into something represented through the physical body of the female actor on stage becomes alluring.

16 *King John* is a play about politics, diplomatic arrangement, and questions of legitimate rule. Late King Richard the Lionheart’s bastard son Philip of Faulconbridge shows strategic tactical competence in diplomatic negotiations; he will be promoted and dubbed a knight called Richard Plantagenet like his royal, lusty father. Philip is not a bastard in the legal sense. He was legitimately born in marriage but is not fathered by his mother’s husband. As

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[39] *Cf.* Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power. Bastards in Renaissance Drama*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 196.

[40] Michael Neill, *op. cit*., p. 270.

[41] Alison Findlay, *op. cit*., p. 1, 6.

the declared bastard son of the Lionheart, he rises in status. Philip is introduced as a bastard very early in *King John*. There seems to be no more of a character explanation; does the status of illegitimacy define him? He is a prominent figure: from the first appearance, he also seems a little different from other bastards in Shakespearean drama. Denying the title of legitimate Faulconbridge heir and accepting the illegitimate status, he proves to be an upstart crow. He seizes offered opportunities, but his ascent and behaviour in the royal family is also admirable. Acknowledged as a royal bastard, he aspires to rise higher in society and gain reputation: "[r]oyal bastards claim illegitimacy in the pursuit of glory rather than wealth".[42] His recognition of royal kinship at first seems honourable and not materialist.

17 Philip is branded as a bastard but accepted in this role: he wants to succeed in a society that does not accept him as the son of Faulconbridge as his younger brother tries to acquire their family's inheritance according to their own normative dynastic system claiming Philip's status as unworthy. Philip proves to be a rather quick-witted, "blunt fellow" (I.1.71), a "madcap" (I.1.84), but also a loyal, dynastically aware "common, robust, patriotic Englishman".[43] He does not shy away from martial struggle: in fact, he seems to thrive in it as the Angiers conflict proves. Philip has some traits that denote him as a heroic bastard, according to Findlay: he seems "virtuous rather than vicious",[44] and challenges the common concept that bastards are considered inferior and evil by nature. The underdog here appears as a positive force who unveils the evils

[42] *Ibid*., p. 182.

[43] Julia C. Van de Water, "The Bastard in *King John*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 11, n°2, 1960, p. 137.

[44] Alison Findlay, *op. cit*., p. 170

of a corrupted society. As the political factions in *King John* are clearly presented as self-indulgent and egotistical, Philip mocks nobility.[45] The acquired detachment through the outsider role enables him to criticise the strategies and players in the political system. He figures as a commentator on law, religion, and society. In the famous “commodity speech” (II.1.561-598), the bastard comments ironically on diplomacy, materialism, and the false truces of politicians: “Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!” (II.1.561). This underlines the bastard’s rather ambiguous role: he despises royalty for breaking bonds and abusing loyalties. But he decides to go with this materialist flow, following the “smooth-fac’d gentleman, tickling commodity” (II.1.573) and declaring “Gain, be my Lord, for I will worship thee!” (II.1.598). The bastard’s decision-making seems purposeful, and stronger than King John’s, to whom he proves a loyal servant. Philip’s speech amends in register and seems more eloquent. He fares from being entertaining to being determined as he controls interior politics and influences foreign affairs. This inconsistent behaviour and the changes, however, show the ambivalent, flawed and subversive tendencies that Philip does incorporate: there are “two distinct characters under the name of the Bastard”,[46] one a typical vice figure, and the other Findlay’s type of the likeable bastard. As he becomes a trusted adviser, the audience can easily identify with Philip and cheer for his fight for acceptance and social mobility when being offered the status of illegitimate son to the former king; he plays a part, he becomes a trusted adviser. But he is an upstart crow, who, when understanding the machinations of court, decides to cherish its machinations to achieve material compensation. Philip is a

[45] *Cf.* Edward Gieskes, “‘He Is but a Bastard to the Time’: Status and Service in The Troublesome Raigne of John and Shakespeare’s *King John*”, *ELH*, vol. 65, n°4, 1998, p. 790.

[46] Julia C. Van de Water, *op. cit*., p. 145.

fascinating role that demands further attention and is very attractive to young actors – of all genders. Because the idea of social discrimination due to illegitimacy is evident with regards to Philip, a comparison of sexist discrimination can highlight mutual aspects of injustice. Casting the illegitimate with the non-normative female actor allows for compelling interpretations.

The Productions

18 Directing *King John* for the RSC in 2012, Maria Åberg made a lot of changes to her version of the history play. The bastard Philip was merged with the character of Hubert who is commanded to kill Arthur but then tries to save the boy. The role was played by Pippa Nixon, which, Åberg recognises, "changed the dynamic between the characters quite profoundly"[47] and there was a comforting reassurance between young and insecure John and bragging bastard. Her relationship with King John – their age seemed similar – was full of today's quick intensity, one that spurs on and then creates doubt as well as trust. At the same time, this re-imagination not only allowed for close bond but also a more obvious sexual tension between John and the Bastard, which did reach aspects of uncomfortable violence and yet heart-breaking clasps between these two.

19 Åberg states that "The Bastard is a classic independent warrior: irreverent, funny, aggressive. Our world contains women who are rude and strong and loyal, who are capable leaders and powerful in their own right. It's interesting to explore how men relate to

[47] Maddy Costa, "The RSC throwns women into the battle", *The Guardian*, 16 April 2012. URL. Accessed 16 November 2021.

them.”[48] Pippa Nixon played the bastard exactly in this irreverent way – this character is transgressive, annoyed, funny, and relentless, or as Van de Water once interpreted, “a veritable whirlwind of activity and eloquence”[49] – but has a warm heart, which the merging with the character of Hubert added to the role. Merging the bastard with Hubert certainly makes the part bigger and more important. At the same time, showing mercy towards Arthur (as Hubert does) could contradict the explosiveness of the casting as it confirms warm, motherly, traditionally feminine feelings towards a child. Jami Rogers criticises that this was the “least successful conceptual use” of restructuring the plot despite “Pippa Nixon’s vibrant, accomplished and engaging performance”.[50] However, read the other way, this scene adds to the rounder character of Philip who plays the part at court and rises ruthlessly while at the same time still displaying real humanity, a conflict often encountered in the supposed dichotomy of the contemporary work-life-balance. Read this way, Pippa Nixon’s portrayal demanded empathy from the audience.

20 Indeed, this version allowed for different facets of gender to be explored. This strengthens the core female characters of the play, Eleanor and Constance, and allows for the women to dominate this adaptation as it, as Pippa Nixon highlights, “backs up Elinor and Constance, following their thought into action, and making the women the heart and strength of the play”.[51] Åberg also cast

[48] *Ibid*.

[49] *Cf.* Kristian Smidt, *Unconformities in Shakespeare’s History Plays*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 80.

[50] Jami Rogers, “King John by Maria Aberg Review”, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 31, n°1, 2013, p. 96.

[51] Maddy Costa, *op. cit*., n. p.; *Cf.* Jami Rogers, *op. cit*., p. 99.

Pandulph as a woman, which makes feminine power even more influential in her version. In the play, female influences decline with the death and disappearance of Eleanor and Constance, and the brief scenes of Blanche and Lady Faulconbridge. Here, Eleanor and Constance, and then Pandulph and the bastard, dominate this production, while Alex Waldman portrays John as a young and naïve king. This production highlighted that women matter.

21 Lisa Pohlers, starring as the bastard in 2018 in the Bonn University Shakespeare Company's production certainly was the most villainous bastard in *King John* as far as these three productions are concerned. They, renamed Jamie in the BUSC adaptation, readily seized each opportunity of power. Alongside, their younger and legitimate brother was also played by a woman which made this conflict appear on par. Though – only – the illegitimate child of Richard Lionheart, she would pose a threat to John's throne: As if taking Edmund from *King Lear* as an example, this bastard vibrated with subversive energy and could aim to succeed to his father's title: towards the end of the production, the audience was inclined to ponder what would happen, should the legitimate heir(s) be eliminated. Jamie was less gender-defined with long blond hair but dressed in a suit.

22 In the BUSC's version, Jamie was grateful to their grandmother Eleanor as well as their king, John. But it was them who killed Prince Arthur – not chance. Marc Erlhöfer's adaptation thus went further than the character in the text: Jamie showed their desire for upward mobility in a ruthless way. Accordingly, Erlhöfer changed the commodity speech and incorporated among other self-authored lines the following words from *Game of Thrones'* Littlefinger Peter Baelish: "Chaos is a ladder". This charismatic bastard uses strife to rise: "Sugar and spice and all things nice? Not in Jamie's […] childhood. […] Having felt like an outsider for most of her life, Jamie soon realizes that her outsider-status may benefit her for once:

Manipulative, clever and ruthless [...] Being underestimated can be an advantage”,[52] the BUSC announced their casting for the Bastard.

23 At the end of the play, Jamie was standing next to the crowned Prince Henry and there was an eerie feeling of where this character might go next. Lisa Pohlers’ version of the bastard certainly displayed the calculated, Machiavellian features of a power politician that is breath-taking to see in a woman in Shakespeare. This production reinvented the Bastard.

24 Simultaneously, in the winter of 2018, the Folger Theatre produced their *King John* with Kate Eastwood Norris as the bastard. Kristin Francoon calls the bastard the protagonist in this production: “She is deftly able to switch from the funny moments to high drama with ease; her monologue where she decries humans’ obsession with Commodity was highly affecting.”[53] Norris shows in how far the bastard really surfs the wave of material culture because that is how society in this production rolls – dressed in an old trench coat, with a proper suit underneath, this Bastard seemed somewhat detached from society which highlighted a liminal aspect of this sometimes marginalised character. Thal claims that Norris is “self-aware” and “self-conscious,”[54] charming the audience in her pretence of belonging to royalty. Galbraith calls her “super-smart, querulous,”

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[52] BUSC [Bonn University Shakespeare Company e.V.], “#2 JAMIE FAULCONBRIDGE aka THE BASTARD”, 29 November 2018. URL. Accessed 11 January 2023.

[53] Kristin Francoon, “Theatre Review: ‘King John’ at Folger Theatre”, *MD Theatre Guide*, 31 October 2018. URL. Accessed 12 November 2021.

[54] Ian Thal, “Review: ‘King John’ at Folger Theatre”, *DC Metro Theatre Arts*, 2018. URL. Accessed 12 November 2021.

and "self-assured": "Eastwood Norris is a hurricane, a force of nature that sweeps in and causes major damage".[55]

25 The bastard in this version looks negligent but seems to know exactly where she is going. In an interview, Eastwood Norris stresses the bastard's "sense of humor, and lust for life". This character is seizing opportunities that life offers to her. She has a playfulness to act according to the framework of a situation. While Eastwood Norris calls her "a complete bad-a*s," she is also keen to recognise the potential of playing this role as a female actor: "Women don't get to experience these things in Shakespeare and it feels incredible."[56] It is this recognition that creates chances and allows female actors to shine and portray different facets of their art. *King John's* bastard character Philip remakes himself and therefore allows and even prompts identity remaking – he thus lends himself to a fluid state of human exploration and can appropriately be assumed through her or their empowering agency.

Conclusion

26 King John's bastard is special in that he is also given two names – the legitimate Philip of Faulconbridge and the illegitimate Richard Plantagenet. This doppelganger identity could also be addressed via the dichotomy between public and private: a stereotypical bossy woman and a warm family type. How much is a female in this role a

[55] Susan Galbraith, "Review: King John. Aaron Posner rescues this lesser Shakespeare", *Do Theatre Scene*, 30 October 2018. URL. Accessed 10 November 2021.

[56] Mark Beachyon, "'A quick 5' with Kate Eastwood Norris", *MD Theatre Guide*, 2018. URL. Accessed 12 November 2021.

provocation? How much is this a reflection upon society that modernises the aspect of dynastic illegitimacy into male privilege’s discrimination? How much is this appropriate stereotyping to dismantle injustice? The Bastard, too, like commodity, seems a “smooth-fac’d gentleman” (II.1.573) – cast with a woman, he will seem well shaved and smooth – if not feminine.

27 To mention one further instance of gender-conscious casting in *King John*: in 2019, in the run cut short by Covid, Rosie Sheehy plays the title role. She describes her creation of the part as not “effeminate”.[57] Sutherland but rather ruthless yet full of “a tremendous amount of grief”, accidentally causing havoc when disappointed. In that same 2019 production, the bastard was played by a person of colour – both these castings provide material for different papers. Clearly, there is a subversive potential through casting choices with regard to the bastard. Agency is lent by voicing injustice: empowering representative marginalised groups can provide a good deal of material for discussion. As far as women are concerned, this still holds true. We need to discover and evaluate the potential of casting choices to address imbalances in society and to enable gender literacy. In the future, this might be further explored via actors and characters on different points of the gender spectrum, e.g. with the casting of transgender actors.

28 If a bastard continues the structural function as an outsider who observes and comments on society, then casting Philip with a female actor raises the awareness of cultural and political implications of female power not only on stage, but in the acting business in general, and in the world, including queer readings that can highlight innovative female empowerment. Gender changes

[57] Gill Sutherland, “Interview: Rosie Sheehy on Playing King John at the RSC”, *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 2019. URL. Accessed 14 November 2021.

demand the attention of an audience to reflect on theatrical conventions and changes in societal codes, and they illuminate other interpersonal and political aspects in the machinations of *King John*. Shakespeare's play allows for these different readings. Experimental casting of this kind can challenge audience expectations. If used cleverly, the "radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female Other suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory."[58] If directors and producers dare to challenge and explore, perspectives will shift. Indeed, "[s]tories shouldn't always be told from the same perspective," as Whittaker mentioned. This creation of new narratives can be radical.

[58] Judith Butler, *op. cit*., p. xxx.

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