
N° 18 | 2024

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

Introduction: “How we commit ourselves”

Par **Pascale Drouet, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine et Imke Lichterfeld**

Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

> Pour citer ce document

Pascale Drouet, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine & Imke Lichterfeld, « Introduction: “How we commit ourselves” », *Shakespeare en devenir* [En ligne], n°18, 2024, mis à jour le 14/12/2024, URL : <https://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/index.php?id=3174>.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 3.0. Article distribué selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons CC BY-NC 3.0. Attribution | Pas d'utilisation commerciale.

Pour tous les articles mis en ligne avant le 01/01/2020, la reproduction et la représentation sont formellement interdites sauf autorisation expresse du titulaire des droits.

“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 Restoration 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, *Tempests* 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 Mercutio 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? After all 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 extent 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.

Bibliographie

FISHER, William, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

HOWARD, Jean E., "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 39, n°4, 1988, p. 418-440.

HORNBY, Richard, "Cross-Gender Casting", *Hudson Review*, vol. 48, n°4, 1996, p. 641-648.

REIMERS, Sara, *Casting and the Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Performances of Shakespeare's Plays*, Ph.D. Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard, Oxford, Oxford University Press, (1987) 1994.

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

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.

Pascale Drouet

Professeur de littérature britannique des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles à l'université de Poitiers, Pascale Drouet est l'auteur de plusieurs ouvrages sur le théâtre de la Renaissance, le dernier étant *Shakespeare and the Denial of Territory* (MUP, 2021). Elle a codirigé de nombreux ouvrages collectifs, parmi lesquels *Shakespeare au risque de la philosophie* (Hermann, 2016) et *Dante et Shakespeare : Cosmologie, politique, poétique* (CG, 2020). Elle a traduit en français et fait une édition critique de *Philaster* de Beaumont et Fletcher (PUFR, 2020) et de *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* de Greene (CG, 2022).

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.

Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine

Professor Emerita in Renaissance Studies at the University of Caen — Normandie, an associate member of the CNRS Research Centre in Theatre and Literary Studies (THALIM). A long-term member of ESRA and of other national and international Shakespeare Association: Société Française Shakespeare, The Stratford International Conference, International Shakespeare Association. Her research interests focus mainly on the interpretation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries on stage, present and past. She published two monographs (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2002; *King Lear*, 2008), edited and co-edited about a dozen volumes, written over a hundred articles in national and international books and Journals (*Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, CNRS-Editions, *Cahiers Shakespeare en Devenir*, *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*...).