

N° 18 | 2024

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

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

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Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

> Pour citer ce document

Adele Lee, « “Thy small pipe [...] shrill and sound”: Vocal Bias in Cross-Gender Shakespeare », *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=3177>.



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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 Nielsen 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, 'squeeking' 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 “lisp[ing]” 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.*

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- 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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