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

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

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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).

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Kiki Lindell Tersmeden is Senior Lecturer of English Literature, Lund University, Sweden, where she also stages Shakespeare's plays with her students. Recent research contributions include a chapter on the earliest Swedish translation of *Macbeth* in *Disseminating Shakespeare in the Nordic Countries* (Arden Shakespeare, 2022) and the article "(There is) Nothing like a Dane: Gertrudes at Elsinore and Elsewhere" (*Critical Survey*, 2023). A contribution on *Macbeth* and Ingmar Bergman will be forthcoming soon in a volume on *Macbeth* in Europe.