**Shakespeare en devenir**
ISSN électronique 1958-9476
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**N° 18 | 2024**
Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

# Gender Changes and the Weak-Queen Dilemma

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Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

## > Pour citer ce document

Imke Lichterfeld, « Gender Changes and the Weak-Queen Dilemma », *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=3186.

**ABSTRACT**

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

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

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

**KEYWORDS**

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

**RÉSUMÉ**

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

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

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

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

**MOTS-CLÉS**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 1. *Richard II*

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 2. *Henry VI*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 3. *Cymbeline*

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Conclusion

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

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

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

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# Notes

[1] Deborah Warner filmed this adaptation two years later: *cf*. Deborah Warner, "Richard II, 1997", *Homepage Deborah Warner*. **URL**. Accessed 28 February 2024.

[2] Royal Shakespeare Company [RSC], "Melly Still 2016 Production". **URL**. Accessed 28 February 2024.

[3] Hudson Shakespeare Company, "Cymbeline", *Hudson Shakespeare Company*, n. d. **URL**. Accessed 20 May 2023.

[4] This might be contested regarding Cymbeline but no matter the criticism, the tragicomic/romantic play depicts his flaws much more than his role as a successful ruler.

[5] Michael Manheim, "The Weak King History Play of the Early 1590's", *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 2, 1969, p. 71-80, p. 71.

[6] Michael Manheim, *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean History Play*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1973, p. 3. *Cf*. Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 33.

[7] Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation. A feminist account of Shakespeare's English histories*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 120.

[8] William Shakespeare, *Henry VI. Part 3*, eds. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2001, I.4.141. From now *3 Henry VI* with quotes in brackets behind the citation.

[9] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 56.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 57

[11] David Bergeron, "Shakespeare's Last Roman Play", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 31, n°1, 1980, p. 31-41, p. 36.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 38.

[13] Both Manheim 1973, *op. cit*., p. 8.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 13

[15] Michael Manheim, art. cit., p. 71.

[16] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 3.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 2; Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, trans. Richard and Claron Winston, Laurence E. Lynch, and Daniel F. Coogan, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965; István P. Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century,* Leiden, Brill, 2011.

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[23] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 76.

[24] *Id*.; *cf*. Michael Manheim, art. cit., p. 73.

[25] Robyn Bolam, "Richard II: Shakespeare and the Languages of the Stage", in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 141-57, p. 145.

[26] James Phillips, "The Practicalities of the Absolute Justice and Kingship in Shakespeare's Richard II", in *English Literary History (ELH)*, vol. 79, n°1, 2012, p. 161-177, p. 162, p. 167-169.

[27] Dorothea Kehler, "King of Tears: Mortality in *Richard II*", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature,* vol. 39, n°1, 1985, p. 7-18, p. 11.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 7.

[29] Leonard Barkan, "The Theatrical Consistency of Richard II", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 29, n°1, 1978, p. 5-19, p. 6.

[30] John R. Elliott Jr., "History and Tragedy in *Richard II*", *Studies in English Literature*, vol. 8, n°2, "Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama", Houston, Rice University, 1968, p. 253-271, p. 257.

[31] Ursula Kizelbach, *The Pragmatics of Early Modern Politics: Power and Kingship in Shakespeare's History Plays*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014, p. 5.

[32] Derek Cohen, "History and the Nation in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 42, n°2, 2002, p. 293-315, p. 297.

[33] *Cf*. Jonathan Baldo, 'The Historical Sublime in Shakespeare's Richard II', in Isabel Karremann, Cornel Zwierlein & Inga May Groote (eds.), *Forgetting Faith? Confessional Negotiations in Early Modern Europe*, Berlin, De Gruyter 2012, p. 81-98, p. 82.

[34] Jennifer Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion on Early Modern English Literature*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 88.

[35] Michael Manheim, art. cit., p. 76.

[36] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 66.

[37] *Id.*

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[39] Jennifer Vaught, *op. cit*., p. 89.

[40] Alan Riding, "*A Female Richard II Captivates the French*", *New York Times*, 27 January 1996. **URL**. Accessed 23 April 2023, n. p.

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[43] Claire Heuchan, *op. cit*., n. p.

[44] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 176.

[45] Carol Chillington Rutter, "Fiona Shaw's Richard II: The Girl as Player-King as Comic", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 48 n°3, 1997, p. 314-324, p. 318.

[46] *Cf*. Carol Rutter, *op. cit*., p. 321.

[47] *Ibid*., p. 319.

[48] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 178.

[49] *Ibid*., p. 181.

[50] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 108.

[51] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[52] *Ibid*., p. 114.

[53] *Ibid*., p. 106.

[54] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[55] Michael Manheim, art. cit., p. 79.

[56] William Shakespeare, *Henry VI. Part 1*, ed. Edward Burns, London, Thomson Learning, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2000; from now with quotes in brackets behind the citation.

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[60] *Cf*. Peter Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

[61] Alexander Leggatt, *op. cit*., p. 1.

[62] Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *op. cit*., p. 67.

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[64] Homer Swander quotes the actor Emry Jones: Homer D. Swander, "The Rediscovery of Henry VI", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 29, n°2, 1978, p. 146-163, p. 154.

[65] Michael Manheim, art. cit., p. 78.

[66] Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *op. cit*., p. 72; *cf*. also p. 24, 44, 62-65; *cf*. Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 177.

[67] *Cf*. Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *op. cit*., p. 68.

[68] *Cf*. Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 58-61.

[69] Peter Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

[70] *Cf*., Martha A. Kurtz, "Tears and Masculinity in the History Play: Shakespeare's *Henry VI*", Jennifer C., Vaught & Lynne Dickson Bruckner (eds.), *Grief and Gender 700-1700,* New York & Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 163-176, p. 173.

[71] William, Shakespeare *Henry VI. Part 2*, ed. Ronald Knowles, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1999.

[72] Seattle Shakespeare Company, *Bring Down the House.* **URL**. Accessed 13 June 2023.

[73] Emily George, "The Breeches Role: Bring Down the House Parts 1 & 2", *Deconstruct*, 12 March 2017. **URL**. Accessed 13 June 2023, n. p. I would like to express my thanks to the company for allowing me to reproduce their production photo.

[74] *Ibid*., n. p.

[75] Hudson Shakespeare Company, "Cymbeline", *Hudson Shakespeare Company*, n. d. **URL**. Accessed 20 May 2023, n. p.

[76] Anne Barton, "Leontes and the Spider: language and speaker in Shakespeare's Last Plays," Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank & and Hunter, G. K. (eds.), *Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.131-150, p. 149.

[77] Alexander Leggatt, *op. cit*., p. vii.

[78] *Cf*. Renate Schruff, *Herrschergestalten bei Shakespeare vor dem Hintergrund zeitgenössischer Vorstellungen vom Herrscherideal*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999, p. 114.

[79] Constance Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies: Ruler and Subject in the Romances*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 12.

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

[81] *Ibid*., p. 73.

[82] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline. King of Britain*, ed. Valerie Wayne, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2017, V.5.67.

[83] Michael Manheim, *op. cit*., p. 185.

[84] Constance Jordan, *op. cit*., p. 70.

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[88] Alexander Leggatt, *op. cit*., p. 12.

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