

2019

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Transgressive or Traditional: Female-Centric Casting in Contemporary Shakespearean Performance

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December 2018**

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ABSTRACT

Cross-gender casting has existed in Shakespearean performance since the first plays were presented. In the early 17th century, this theme was presented in the form of female roles as portrayed by male actors. Now, in the 21st century, the practice has started to be repeated (albeit modified) in the form of female actors portraying male roles. And while it is merely the other side of the same coin, it's considered socially transgressive. Is it justified? Can that practice be normalized, and if so, why should it be? This paper seeks to answer these questions by investigating opportunity for female actors in Shakespeare's works, including the manner in which contemporary, female-led productions are criticized. It strives to question social transgressiveness within cross-gender casting in the hopes of normalizing this practice in modern Shakespearean performance.

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**TRANSGRESSIVE OR TRADITIONAL:
FEMALE-CENTRIC CASTING IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE**

It's no secret that women have had to fight for centuries to earn basic rights. Now, in modern society, women want something they haven't had much of in the past: power. Not in the hungry, fear-mongering sense of the word, but rather in terms of ownership. Women want and deserve a say in society, in government, in how they are perceived and treated. While they have long wanted these rights, now they are demanding them. And, as always, the world of art and entertainment serves as a mirror to the real one. There is an uprising of new, modern female characters on stage and screen who are fierce and powerful.

But what about characters from the world of classical entertainment, specifically that of Shakespeare? The Bard's works boast long-lauded characters who are complex and powerful, many of whom convey universal themes that still hold up in today's society. It's why these plays are read and revived over and over again some four centuries after their original productions -- performances that featured men in every role. Traditional gender-bending in Shakespearean performance dictated male actors to play female characters. Why is the inverse of that -- female portrayal of male characters, arguably the other side of the same coin -- considered socially transgressive?

Upon analysis, a historical journey from men playing men and women, to men playing men and women playing women, to women playing women and men becomes evident. It is a prime example of history repeating itself, though in a modified sense -- a

historical chiasmus. This paper will explore the function of cross-gender casting in contemporary Shakespearean performance, specifically the portrayal of male roles by female actors, and its critical reception in society.

BACKGROUND

Elementary Theatre and Societal Perception of Gender

My introduction to theatre was concurrent with my introduction to Shakespeare. In fact, I believe that is why I “caught the bug” in the first place. When I was 11, my fifth grade teacher announced that our class would audition for and perform Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. I had checked out several of his works -- including *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* -- from the community library the previous summer and had become fascinated with this style of language, in which a person could communicate commonplace thoughts and feelings so poetically. And while I had never been in a play before, I suddenly yearned for the opportunity to dissect and perform those words. Shakespeare was the ultimate bridge between literature and performance, a certainty that was appealing to a kid who always had her nose buried in a book.

I was cast as Baptista, the father of Katherine and Bianca, in that production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. My teacher didn’t hesitate to cast me in that role due to my gender; he also cast female students in the roles of Tranio, Gremio, Hortensio, etc. because they communicated the language effectively. I do remember making an initial mental note that my classmates and I were portraying characters originally written to be men, but this fact was normalized almost immediately in the rehearsal room for everyone involved, and none

of us perceived it to be a strange or atypical choice. But it is a truth that gender roles are omnipresent in society -- even when it comes to children -- so why was this class of fifth graders able to so readily accept the reversal of such? I can only speak to my own experience. Perhaps aided by the fact that I had only ever *read* Shakespeare's plays before and therefore had no preconceived notions of the appearances of the characters, or by the fact that my teacher never acted as if he were gifting female students opportunities to portray characters they may not typically play, the decision to cast female students in male roles did not strike me as out of the ordinary. I wonder if the parents and teachers sitting in the audience were more overtly affected by watching female actors portray textually male roles. At the very least, it is likely they viewed this facet of the performance as an educational tool to enhance or equalize the experience for the students involved. But if it was such, it was by virtue of being a presentation of *traditional performance practice* in Shakespearean drama. As my teacher informed us, cross-gender casting was a theme of Shakespeare from the very first performance. If the fact that some female students played men in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* as performed by a class of fifth graders was to be viewed as educational, it was so not because of its perceived social transgressiveness, but simply by virtue of its continuation of a historical practice.

Gender Roles in Early Shakespearean Performance

Cross-gender casting has existed in Shakespeare since the first performances of his plays (likely *Julius Caesar* at the Globe at the end of the 16th century) when male actors portrayed all roles, male and female. While women were permitted to attend as audience

members and even hold other jobs in the theatre, they were not allowed on stage until 44 years after Shakespeare's death. Instead, female roles were played by "a small cohort of highly trained boys" (Bulman). As James C. Bulman states in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*:

Historians even debate whether or not audiences were entirely aware that they were watching young men instead of women. In early reviews of Shakespeare's plays, actors who played female characters are exclusively referred to as "she," but this may have merely been a respectful attempt to abide by the character's gender for the sake of theatrical assumption. We have good reason to suspect that some were aware of cross-gender casting, as extreme Protestant society was anti-theatre for this very reason, denouncing cross-dressing as a sin (Bulman).

But given that Shakespeare often used cross-dressing as a plot device in multiple plays (including *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*), a practice that also could have incited negative reactions, there is no way to be completely sure that the cross-gender casting was to what Protestant society responded so vehemently.

History was made in 1660 when director Thomas Jordan enlisted a female actor to play Desdemona in his London production of *Othello* following a release of theatre patents by King Charles II. Historians aren't positive who it was, exactly; cases can be made for both Anne Marshall and Margaret Hughes. And to further the argument that spectators did, in fact, know (or came to know) that the actors who played female roles had previously been male -- the concept of women playing women was apparently so new to Shakespearean

audiences that Jordan wrote a prologue to serve as “proof” that Desdemona was, in fact, being portrayed by a female actor (McManus). It went as follows:

I saw the Lady drest;
The Woman playes to day, mistake me not,
No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat;
A Woman to my knowledge.

Of course, this has since shifted -- women portray women in most modern Shakespearean performance, often enough that audiences no longer require evidence of an actor’s womanhood prior to the production, rendering prologues about glimpsing their bodies backstage unnecessary. There is no absence of female roles in the Bard’s body of work, but female actors have long craved the opportunity to play roles traditionally written to be male.

Among the earliest -- and arguably the most illustrious -- instances of such was Sarah Bernhardt’s portrayal of Hamlet in 1899, almost exactly three centuries after the first performance of *Hamlet* in 1600. Not only did she perform in a French adaptation of the play; she also performed the role in London, in Stratford, and eventually immortalized her performance on film. While Bernhardt was lauded as the best actor of her generation (“There are five kinds of actresses: bad actresses, fair actresses, good actresses, great actresses. And then there is Sarah Bernhardt,” Mark Twain famously said of her), even she was met with adversity for taking on Shakespeare’s brooding, intellectual protagonist. Actor and critic Elizabeth Robins praised Bernhardt’s abilities as an actor, but disparaged her attempt at playing a male character, writing in a 1900 review:

For a woman to play at being a man is, surely, a tremendous handicap in the attempt to produce a stage illusion. There may be room for difference of opinion about her success in simulating the passions, but there is no real difference of opinion about her successes in pretending that she is a man. However well she does it (and I do not believe it could be better done than in the instance under consideration), there is no moment in the drama when the spectator is not fully and calmly conscious that the hero is a woman masquerading, or is jarred into sharp realization of the fact by her doing something that is very like a man. It is a case where every approach to success is merely another insistence on failure.

Robins was not alone in her critique. Bernhardt was met with antipathy from multiple reviewers, who were “obviously prejudiced against a female Hamlet... infusing into their criticism a distinct undertone of ridicule” (Shudofsky). So why, if met with such opposition, did Sarah Bernhardt gravitate so strongly toward the role of Hamlet when she had her pick of any female role she desired? A quick overview of Shakespeare’s body of work reveals the obvious.

OPPORTUNITY FOR FEMALE ACTORS

Age and Power

There are two clear reasons why female actors may feel creatively shorted by Shakespeare’s work: age and power. While Shakespeare wrote plenty of older male characters -- King Lear, Richard III, and Prospero, to name a few -- most of Shakespeare’s most famous female characters are still in the throes of youth. They are the Juliets, Violas,

Hermias, Helenas of the world, and even though they may be dynamic characters, they are often either lovers or soon to be. The older women too, of which there are a handful, tend to be supporters to the male characters in their respective plays. They exist as wives, as mothers; Lady Capulet to Capulet, Gertrude to Hamlet. They certainly aren't in positions of power compared to the men of Shakespeare's world. In fact, when females gain power in Shakespeare, it is nearly always through a man. *Measure for Measure* features a scene between Angelo and Isabella, in which Angelo, a newly appointed judge in the city of Vienna, sentences Isabella's brother to death for breaking a law. When Isabella pleads for her brother's life, Angelo demands that Isabella have sexual intercourse with him in order to save her brother. Isabella refuses because she is on the path to becoming a nun and has sworn her virtue to God. Angelo is painted as the villain in the scene, doesn't achieve his objective, and is exposed in the end. But Isabella is ultimately "saved" by the Duke, another male character in the play, whom she ends up marrying. Though Isabella achieves justice against Angelo, she still denounces her personal values for the wishes of the Duke.

Even Lady Macbeth, lionized as one of the most power-hungry Shakespearean female characters, climbs up the royal ladder through a series of murders by her husband's side. Her most iconic scene involves her pleading with the forces of darkness and hell to "unsex" her -- to take away those female characteristics (maternity, gentility) that prevent her from enacting her pathway to power. The fact that she is driven mad by the end is also something to consider in regard to Shakespeare's presentation of gender -- is it possible that Lady Macbeth's insanity serves as social commentary on a woman's inability to handle even an indirect position of power? She may be the brains of the operation, but the end goal

is for Macbeth himself to reap the rewards of kingship. And in the First Folio of 1623 (the sole source for the play's text), she is called "Macbeth's wife," "Macbeth's lady," or "lady" -- she never receives a character name of her own.

When female actors are only invited to portray roles of their own gender, they lose chances to embody the types of complex, power-centric roles that are so often written to be men in Shakespeare's oeuvre. But this neither necessitates nor justifies lack of opportunity for female actors to play roles such as Julius Caesar, Henry V, or Richard III.

SPECIFICITY OF TRADITION AND PERCEPTION OF GENDER

Gender-bending in Shakespearean work has existed since the first play in that body of work was ever produced. Male portrayal of female characters is considered a traditional practice because it is what was originally done in performance throughout the late 1500s - early 1600s. In the most basic academic context, cross-gender casting is historically accurate.

And yet, people either oppose or advocate one half of that theme in practice. Female actors playing male characters in Shakespeare is just now making its way into the cultural lexicon, and the way critics handle this manner of implementing tradition is imperative to its normalization in society. But its supposed newness seems to incite reactions even among seasoned pundits of the theatre. Glenda Jackson's upcoming portrayal of King Lear as part of Broadway's spring 2019 season will likely be recognized critically -- whether charged or championed -- as a transgressive narrative of sorts. Similar to Sarah Bernhardt

in 1899, Jackson won't simply be assessed for her interpretation of Lear, but also for her ability to portray a character originally written to be a gender different from her own.

Why is female portrayal of male characters in Shakespeare considered socially transgressive? It is looked at as a different approach to the material, when in reality it is merely a facet of the way it's always been done. Perhaps this is because society is specific, and attaches itself to hard conceptual limits that are often borne out of tradition. Men portraying female roles is perceived to be *specifically* traditional in a way that women portraying male roles is not.

Should society (or even the theatre community) accept that tradition must be specific? There is no doubt that gender plays a major role in society. After all, as stated in *Paradoxes of Gender* by Judith Lorber:

Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes...[it] is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them -- unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated... gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives (13-15).

From the moment we are integrated into society, human nature drives us to crave societal acceptance; the threat of societal dislocation Lorber references is the opposite of that and therefore undesirable and even terrifying to many. To see someone who

challenges societal perceptions of gender may cause humans to feel incompetent when they long to “place them” and find it difficult to do so. It is why many shirk away from those who don’t fall into the gender binary or don’t reflect specific traits society has come to expect from women and men -- for women, femininity, love, motherly instincts; for men, strength, independence, bravery. The frustration that may come with the inability to recognize these traits in someone who defies the categorical reflects an unfulfilled desire to categorize; a failure to do something we believe society asks us to do. Therefore, we may respond with hostility or indifference in order to combat the fear of experiencing societal incompetence as a result.

James C. Bulman challenges this in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, citing assertions made by queer theorists like Judith Butler that “there is no fixed, essential nature of maleness or femaleness: rather, gender identification depends on performativity” (11). He notes that Butler’s idea of the nonobservance of gender is a crucial aspect in understanding the function of cross-gender casting in the theatre at large. The theatre has long served as a place to explore concepts society is ready (or beginning to be ready) to examine and challenge, and gender roles are no exception.

He’s correct in stating that the theatre community in particular -- performers, creators, and critics alike -- is known for challenging societal normality through art. Does it not have the power to remove those requirements that lock a practice in as “traditional”? This necessitates that community to assess history in a manner that is conceptual rather than fastidious. Perhaps the ability to evaluate this practice thematically could only follow

as a result of normalizing female portrayal of male characters, in which case the only answer is to do it often.

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES AND CRITICAL RESPONSE

Julius Caesar

In 2012, the Donmar Warehouse, a performance art theatre in London, produced *Julius Caesar* with an all-female cast. Directed by Phyllida Lloyd and starring Frances Barber and Dame Harriet Walter, it set the classical history play in a women's prison, utilizing the harsh conditions as a contemporary backdrop for the violence that is intrinsic in *Caesar*.

Critic Charles Spencer of *The Telegraph* was one of the first to review the production. He begins by commenting on the dissatisfaction he has heard from female actors who desire "decent" parts (perhaps he refers to more complex, power-centric roles). He categorizes Lloyd's all-female production of *Caesar* as a "radical step to remedy the situation." Furthermore, he states, "Before seeing this women-only Caesar I vowed that I wouldn't resort to Dr. Johnson's notorious line in which he compared a woman's preaching to a 'dog walking on hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.'" He refers to 18th century English writer Samuel Johnson, a man described by fellow *Telegraph* journalist Boris Johnson as "sexist and xenophobic" in a 2009 article. (He also says, "You might find some Daily Telegraph columnists who still think like that -- but not in print." Wait three years, Mr. Johnson, and you'll find you've been proven wrong.)

Spencer's use of Samuel Johnson's quote as a way to criticize Lloyd's production implies that the only element of Lloyd's all-female *Caesar* worth noting was the shock value that resulted from female actors portraying male roles. In doing so, he stoops to a level of sexism comparable to that of Samuel Johnson -- only he does it in the 21st century. Moreover, his judgment of cross-gender casting as "radical" prevents him from adequately assessing the work done by those actors, which is his job.

Luckily, few critics who attended the production shared Spencer's mentality. In a review for *The Guardian*, critic Michael Billington writes:

It is one thing to have an ingenious concept, another to carry it out. And Lloyd's production proves that female actors can bring a fresh perspective to traditionally male roles...the production feels powerfully motivated: you feel these imprisoned women are impelled to present a play that deals with violence, conflict and the urge to overthrow any form of imposed authority.

But even this review focuses heavily on the all-female cast as a specific and novel lens through which to view the material. And while Billington ends on a glowing note, the line that prefaces his praise shouldn't go unaddressed: "I don't think we should get carried away and start arguing that single-sex Shakespeare is the only way forward." Was a disclaimer necessary? Does the enactment of an all-female Shakespearean production bring with it an assertion that every performance of the Bard's work from here on out must follow suit? Lloyd's *Julius Caesar* was one exploration of the text, as each and every production is. Nowhere in any interpretation is there a declaration that it must only be interpreted in that manner going forward. It is possible that Billington's statement was a

disclaimer not to protect his own school of thought, but for the benefit of the reader -- to make them feel more comfortable reading about the piece. But even so, if the reader necessitates said disclaimer to move forward in reading a review of an all-female Shakespearean cast (“they shouldn’t all be like this, but this one’s done well”), maybe they simply aren’t the intended audience to begin with.

Lloyd’s same production was revived in 2013 Off-Broadway at St. Ann’s Warehouse. In a *New York Times* review entitled “Friends, Romans, Countrywomen,” Ben Brantley states, “As biologically inapt as it may sound, this interpretation of one of Shakespeare’s most manly tragedies... generates a higher testosterone level than any I have seen.” Again, he precludes his approval with a statement intended to set a skeptical reader at ease -- not as blatant as Billington’s, but a disclaimer nonetheless. Brantley also notes that cross-gender casting is becoming more common in contemporary Shakespearean performance. What he fails to mention is that in reality, it has always been common, just not by way of female actors portraying men.

Henry IV

Also directed by Phyllida Lloyd and performed at the Donmar Warehouse, *Henry IV* opened in 2014. New York Times critic Ben Brantley makes less of a disclaimer this time around, asserting in his review of the 2015 St. Ann’s transfer that Harriet Walter was perfect as the titular role, declaring, “this Henry would command in any production.” He goes on to commend the setting of the production (a penitentiary, though one less regulated than in *Caesar*) and the work of the actors. And, similar to early pundits of

Shakespearean works, Brantley doesn't shy away from using the pronouns of the characters as written by Shakespeare. When men consistently portrayed women, critics addressed female characters by feminine pronouns. Brantley follows suit, but in reverse, referring to Walter's Henry as "he" without pause throughout the review. Brantley concludes his critique unflinchingly, noting:

It's a multilayered act of liberation. Prisoners are allowed to roam the wide fields of Shakespeare's imagination; fine actresses are given the chance to play meaty roles that have been denied them; and we get to climb out of the straitjackets of our traditional perceptions of a venerated play.

Brantley's ending statement is one of the only times he hammers in the fact that the production was done in a manner that could be considered non-traditional. This time around, he spends less time remarking on the theme of swapped genders and more time evaluating the production itself. It makes for a better depiction of the work at hand that is far more compelling to read.

The Tempest

The final work in Lloyd's female-led Shakespearean trilogy presented at the Donmar Warehouse and revived at St. Ann's Warehouse hits the overall message home the hardest. In fact, this story may have been the most suited of the three to the director's comprehensive vision. In an interview with Cynthia Zarin of *The New Yorker*, Lloyd states of *The Tempest*, "Gender seems so fluid at the get-go. Ariel, what is he, or she? Prospero is both mother and father to Miranda" (Zarin). This aspect of the play means it could have

sufficed as a suitable entry point for Lloyd's series, but it is even more expertly purposed as the trilogy's conclusion.

Harriet Walter leads the charge again in this third production, this time as Prospero. *Variety* critic Matt Trueman makes the point that Lloyd's trilogy presents the prison system in a political manner, each play dealing with a different theme -- *Julius Caesar* with domestic violence, *Henry IV* with addiction, and finally *The Tempest* with release. And akin to Brantley's review of *Henry IV*, Trueman recognizes the fact that women portrayed all roles in *The Tempest* -- and even highlights the effect of the choice -- without disclaiming it for the reader:

The project was never simply gender-blind. Lloyd's cast plays women playing men -- prisoners performing Shakespeare behind bars. We watch through layers and see his plays through their eyes -- their takes on conspiracy against Julius Caesar and on Henry IV's civil war, on powerful politicians and sidelined wives. Rather than goodies and baddies, they see rivalrous equals. Violence isn't immediately condemned, nor are heroes automatically esteemed. The moral complexity shoots up.

Trueman's critique is complex in such a way that it recognizes what Lloyd did in casting another all-female production, but without allowing it to serve as the forefront of the material's analysis. Critique that does the latter, such as Charles Spencer's of *Caesar*, or even Ben Brantley's earlier reviews of that same production, is like looking through a smudged lens -- the reader may be able to make out what the lens attempts to capture, but they're just as likely to focus on the smudge instead. Brantley's review of *Henry IV*, and

Trueman's review of *The Tempest*, are effective in examining themes of those productions in context without allowing said context to take over, therefore serving as clear lenses through which to peer at the material. Only then can the normalization of female actors portraying male roles begin.

The Taming of the Shrew

That's not to say that there is no room whatsoever to regard female actors playing male roles as a complete change in the material. Such analysis might be warranted, depending on the production and role at hand.

In 2016, British actor Janet McTeer took on the role of Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, also directed by Phyllida Lloyd, in New York City as part of the Public's annual Shakespeare in the Park series. *The Taming of the Shrew* tells the story of the "shrewish" Katherine as she is married off to Petruchio, who views her as a challenge and vows to "tame" her by the play's end. He treats her like his property, starving her and forbidding her to sleep until she behaves like a lady.

As the driving force of Kate's misery, in which she is forced to become complicit by the end of the play, Petruchio is known for being one of Shakespeare's most oppressive male characters. Unlike Caesar, who wields his power over citizens of all genders, Petruchio utilizes his societal power as a male to abuse his wife specifically. Certainly, abuse is abuse. But could it be true that in this context, portrayal by a female actor could soften the blow and redeem a character just a bit? According to New York Theater Guide critic Tulis McCall, McTeer's Petruchio "loves life and all its juicy offerings... this Petruchio

is a person you want to be when you grow up,” unlike the misogynistic Petruchio of other productions.

So in fact, it may be that this particular play (among others that carry similar themes) demands to be analyzed through that lens; that the gender swap *should* be more than simply mentioned in the review.

MODERN RECEPTION THROUGH INDIRECT INCORPORATION

Bernhardt/Hamlet

There are performances that directly incorporate cross-gender casting into Shakespeare’s body of work in a contemporary context, and in the same line of thought, there are contemporary meta works that address the subject matter itself, and the critical response to works that featured female actors performing in male roles.

Theresa Rebeck’s new play *Bernhardt/Hamlet*, which had a limited Broadway run at the American Airlines Theatre from September 25 to November 18th, 2018, dramatizes the story of actor Sarah Bernhardt’s famous 1899 portrayal of one of Shakespeare’s most revered male characters. In the play, Bernhardt (played by Janet McTeer) finds herself at what she deems an awkward age to perform Shakespeare -- in terms of female roles, she is too old for Ophelia, with a spirit far more youthful than that of Gertrude. So, she assembles a cast and begins the rehearsal process for a production of *Hamlet*, featuring herself in the titular role. She argues that a middle-aged woman is the perfect person to play Hamlet, a character whom Bernhardt maintains (to the distress of many older men in the show) is 19 years old.

Bernhardt argues that not only does she possess the wisdom of age -- ideal for a character known for his intellect -- she also has access to a tender emotional core, which she contends is most present in women and young men (including the Prince of Denmark). Though she is met with dubiousity from friends, family, and colleagues alike, she cannot be stopped. She even goes so far as to enlist her favorite collaborator (and lover) to rewrite *Hamlet* in shortened, less flowery text so that she may feel more connected to the material and the character -- a layer which, in Bernhardt's actual 1899 production, gave critics something else to grab hold of aside from the fact that Hamlet was played by a woman. Although the story ends before this comes to fruition, the critic vs. Bernhardt debate is evident throughout the play in the form of Louis, a prominent Parisian theatre critic. Indeed, he designates women with power "freaks" and is so averse to the idea of Bernhardt's portrayal of Hamlet that very little room is left in the audience's minds for the possibility of positive critical reception.

Modern Media: Film and Television

Film adaptations of Shakespearean productions are common practice. If not overt -- like the 1993 version of *Much Ado About Nothing* starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson, or Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes -- the stories are hidden in modern language and setting, such as cult classics *West Side Story* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*) and *10 Things I Hate About You* (based on *The Taming of the Shrew*). But it is rare that Shakespeare on film, whether classical or modernized, utilizes cross-gender casting at all. In fact, most stick to the genders that

characters were traditionally assigned. One counterexample of this is Joss Whedon's 2012 adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which Riki Lindhome played the role of Conrade. It's a relatively small role, but certainly a start.

The television world may too be moving in a different direction. Margot Robbie, in association with Australian production company Hoodlum and ABC Studios International, is spearheading a television series that not only will reinterpret Shakespeare's works from a female perspective, but also a more contemporary one. Just as Sarah Bernhardt imagined a new *Hamlet* through the late 19th century's version of modernity, Robbie envisions these themes and stories told through the lens (literally) of the 21st century. In this way, what could arguably be considered the most classical form of entertainment will meet the most modern form.

CONCLUSION

While cross-gender casting is a traditional Shakespearean practice, the portrayal of male roles by female actors is a facet of tradition that is only beginning to be explored in contemporary performance. Director Phyllida Lloyd, along with actors Harriet Walter and Janet McTeer, are industry professionals in the forefront of this venture through productions such as *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV*, *The Tempest*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. And while the spearheading of this movement by these women is necessary (after all, someone must set the precedent), the practice will not truly be normalized until it is more commonly done among other industry creatives as well.

The opportunities afforded to women working as actors in Shakespearean theatre are affected in part by the way in which preexisting female-centric productions have been, are, and will be explored and criticized. As critical reception of these productions has shown, we can pave the way for more opportunity by looking at the actual work that is being done onstage in lieu of the perceived societal newness of female actors portraying male roles. Doing so is the only way to normalize and popularize this practice, which affects other forms of media as well as general society.

It is important to acknowledge that the research addressed in this paper, which leans largely into the gender binary, is only a starting point. The end goal is complete gender inclusiveness in the theatrical world. The more the line between women and men is blurred and diminished, the more we can foster opportunity for actors across the gender spectrum.

While productions that involve female-centric casting may be recognized as societally transgressive by virtue of turning history on its head, the importance of analyzing them for the work that is on the stage, instead of simply for upholding a different interpretation of Shakespearean tradition, is monumental. The more focus placed on the work as the critical linchpin, and less on the fact that the work was being done by female actors, the more normalized it will become, which in turn will open doors for actors of all gender identities who long for and deserve the opportunity to portray complex characters in Shakespearean performance.

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