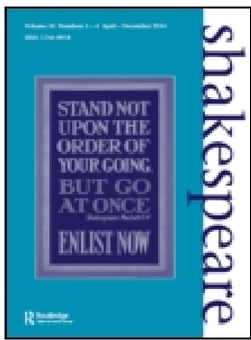

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What a piece of work is a (wo)man: the revelations of cross-gendered Shakespeare

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Review of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (directed by Sarah Frankcom) at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 18 October 2014

Review of *Henry IV* (directed by Phyllida Lloyd) at the Donmar Warehouse, London, 16 October 2014

In a September 2014 article for the *Guardian* entitled "What a Piece of Work is a (Wo) Man: The Perils of Cross-gendered Shakespeare", Mark Lawson said of such productions, "if the governing aim of a production is to *make the play seem different* [my emphasis], perhaps those involved ought to be doing a different play". This seems to be missing the point, as exemplified in the latest gender-blind performances of *Henry IV* (a conflation of *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV*), directed by Phyllida Lloyd at the Donmar Warehouse, and Sarah Frankcom's *Hamlet* for Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre. Taking on some of the most iconic male roles within the Western canon not only provides female actors with the opportunity to flex their performance muscles beyond the well-trodden roles of Hedda, Electra and Rosalind, but also, as Sarah Werner has noted in her work on feminist theatre, enables them to "legitimize their performance" within the male-dominated world of the theatre (45). For it is an unavoidable truism that, while an actor is still valued on his/her ability to "do" Shakespeare, the strong female roles are few and far between. Moreover, as a locus of debate, dissent and social corrective, the theatre would be doing a disservice to its own heritage if it did not continue to question conventions and demythologize cultural norms. Surely every director tackling a new production of Shakespeare strives to "make the play seem different". The alternative is too unthinkable to bear: continuous runs of *King Lears* and *Hamlets* with revolving casts, revolving stages and identikit replicas across the capital cities of the world. The Shakespearean plays we have inherited are not prescriptive theatrical *pro forma*, but ambiguous, contradictory, and replete with inconsistencies. Ripe, in other words, for reinvention.

The prospect of Maxine Peake playing Hamlet generated a sense of anticipation before the production even opened. Albeit an actress known for her versatility and range, taking on roles as generically and stylistically contrasting as Twinkle in *Dinnerladies* (1998–2000) and Myra Hindley in *See No Evil: The Moors Murders* (2006), she does not have the reputation of Harriet Walter (concurrently playing King

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Henry in Lloyd's *Henry IV*) as an established Shakespearean stage actor. She has some form, having played Ophelia in a production of *Hamlet* for the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2002 and Doll Tearsheet in the BBC's adaptation of *2 Henry IV* in 2012. However, she has also been quoted as saying that Shakespeare's female roles can be "quite problematic" (Youngs). Rather than maximizing the cultural capital of her celebrity to open in one of the major London theatres, she chose a limited run in Manchester's Royal Exchange. "If you want to see this historic performance", she seemed to be saying, "you have to come to me". The choice of venue was bold, not only in terms of its "regional" location, but inasmuch as it offers no hiding place for the actor. Set in the round with tiered seating on three levels, the Royal Exchange has clear sightlines and an intimate feel. Indeed, the theatre publicity claims that not one of its 760 audience members is more than 9 metres from the stage. This creates a strong sense of immediacy and vitality, with an increased capacity for actor-audience and intra-audience engagement (Royal Exchange Website). For Frankcom's *Hamlet*, whose emphasis was on the domestic and the familial rather than the political and the epic, it was the ideal spatial configuration.

Although conspicuous by their absence in English theatre since Frances de la Tour's seminal performance in 1979, female Hamlets have been a relatively consistent phenomenon on the stages of Europe since the 1600s. Indecisive, prolix, cerebral, introspective – Hamlet's "femininity" has long been the subject of critical debate. Opinions have swung wildly in either direction, from Edward P. Vining's assertion in *The Mystery of Hamlet* (Philadelphia, 1881) that Hamlet was really a princess in disguise, to the critic William Winter's denouncement of female Hamlets in *Shakespeare on the Stage* (1911–16) as "absurd and out of place" (qtd. in Howard 21, 112). Maxine Peake's performance, therefore, carried the burden of much expectation and speculation. Would she portray him as a woman, "Hamlette, Princess of Denmark", perhaps? Or, in the cross-dressing tradition of Shakespeare's theatre, as a man who happens to be played by a female actor? The answer, as I discovered, lay somewhere in between.

If the job of theatre is to "hold […] the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22), then Frankcom's production demonstrated that human nature tends toward artifice, performance and duplicity. And what Peake's portrayal of Hamlet brought to this conceit was a demystification of gender as a complex of culturally coded conventions. Eschewing the normative signifiers of masculinity, she played gender and sexuality as shifting concepts on a sliding scale rather than a dialectic of discrete categories. In an interview for Radio 4, Sarah Frankcom described Hamlet as being of "indeterminate gender". She explained how she had taken her inspiration from, among others, Tilda Swinton, who famously portrayed the gender-shifting Orlando in the 1992 film adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel (Frankcom).

Some newspaper reviewers, such as Susannah Clapp of the *Observer*, likened Maxine Peake's peroxide elfin-cut – feathered at the back and floppy on top – to the androgynous David Bowie. For me, however, it recalled Kenneth Branagh in the title role of his epic four-hour film of *Hamlet* (1996). However, the similarities ended there. For where Branagh emphasized the political elements of the play, inserting flash-cuts of an advancing Norwegian army to frame the action within a wider context of aggressive imperialist expansion, Frankcom's production excised all reference to Fortinbras and Norway, and thus turned a political tragedy into a domestic drama. The in-the-round setting and minimalist aesthetic contributed to this sense of insidious claustrophobia. Claudius' address to the wedding guests, often set in a ceremonial context, was simply

staged around an eight-seater dining table. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes was played out in front of an audience of six, and the final *tableau* featured more corpses than live bodies. In the absence of Fortinbras and the Ambassadors, Horatio delivered his closing lines to the audience beyond the footlights, increasing the sense of spectator complicity made possible by the spatial dynamics of the theatre space. Although Peake's Hamlet retained the line accusing Claudius of popping in "between th' election and my hopes" (5.2.66), delivering it with all the rancour of a disinherited prince, the production lacked the political context and epic scale to lend credibility to her words.

There were other textual excisions, most notably the deferment of "To be or not to be" until after the killing of Polonia (re-gendered as a combination of officious bureaucrat and manipulative matriarch). The effect of this revision was twofold: it gave a clearer sense of causality to Hamlet's suicidal intentions (there was a conspicuous "method" to Peake's "performance" of madness), but it also lightened the burden of expectation placed on this most famous of soliloquies. As Michael Billington wryly noted, "'To be or not to be' comes so late in the evening that one thought someone might have mislaid it". Moving it to the second scene after the interval confounded audience expectations, enabling Peake to deliver it in a way that did not feel like a citation of generations of previous male Hamlets. In fact, her delivery felt new-minted for a number of reasons. Eschewing the declamatory style and "received pronunciation" of many of her predecessors, she worked through the meandering thought-processes of this speech with a naturalistic style that appeared spontaneous and in-the-moment. Her tone was controlled, registering Hamlet's mercurial intellectual switches with subtle changes in register, and a slight catch in her throat conveyed an emotional intensity reminiscent of Judi Dench. However, it was her body language that most effectively encapsulated the character's dramatic range. Flipping effortlessly between steely eyed determination and a childlike unselfconsciousness, she brought a sense of visceral vitality to her performance that was mesmerising to behold.

Although Peake's subtle performance benefitted from an intimate playing space, there were inevitably some disadvantages to playing in-the-round. The young children within the travelling troupe of players were lost amid the melee of adult actors, and their inexperience manifested itself in their failure to project. However, their self-conscious theatricals were not entirely anomalous in the context of Frankcom's extended meditation on performance, seeming and outward show. Often a distraction on the professional stage, the artifice of the children's performance was of a piece with the production's overall anti-illusionist aesthetic and its insistent foregrounding of performance *as* performance. This was not limited to the cross-gender, re-gendered and colour-blind casting, but extended also to aspects of the set. For instance, when the King called "Give me some light" (3.2.257) during *The Mousetrap*, the interior wall of the theatre lifted and the auditorium was bathed in the glaring bright lights of the Royal Exchange foyer. A similar *coup de théâtre* was used in Jamie Lloyd's two Shakespearean productions at the Trafalgar Studios (*Macbeth*, 2013 and *Richard III*, 2014). These were also staged in-the-round, the back wall lifting to reveal the streets beyond the theatre. In all three productions, the effect was to jolt the audience out of a complacent immersion in the theatrical illusion. And in the case of *Hamlet*, it had an additional function of reinforcing the all-pervading sense of surveillance and performativity. Not only was I acutely aware of my fellow spectators seated all around the stage, but I also began to feel as though I was being watched by an invisible audience beyond the theatre walls.

There were elements of this production which were less successful in terms of challenging audience expectations. One such example was the performance of class.

While Peake maintained a distinctly Bolton inflection to her voice, claiming her right to the role not only as a woman but also as a Northerner, she inexplicably exaggerated her flat vowels to the point of parody when assuming an "antic disposition" (1.5.173). Similarly, although Michelle Butterfly overturned the tradition of the male Shakespearean clown with her accomplished comedic performance as the grave-digger, her overemphatic "Scouse" routine merely reinforced regional stereotypes. I could not help feeling that it would have made for a far more provocative performance had Frankcom followed through her gender subversions with a comparative re-examination of class assumptions. A Manchester-based play casting a Liverpudlian to play the fool is surely no more subversive than an RSC "received pronunciation" production casting a West Country or Northern clown.

More disappointing, because inconsistent with the larger de-gendering agenda, was the objectification of Ophelia. While Frankcom eschewed the traditional practice of laying out her corpse as an object of the scopophilic male gaze (for a recent example see David Farr's 2013 production for the RSC), she did, however, take the questionable decision to have Ophelia strip to her underwear during the mad scene. While lacking any sense of eroticism, it felt nonetheless gratuitously voyeuristic and, from a narrative perspective at least, superfluous. For it made a nonsense of Gertrude's lyrical description of Ophelia drowning: "her garments, heavy with their drink", dragging her "[t]o muddy death" (4.7.153–55). The (un)clothing trope continued into the graveyard scene, where a large pile of jumbled garments dropped from the flies into the centre of the stage. The grave-digger then arranged them in a rectangle shape to delineate the parameters of the grave, throwing out bunched-up sweaters as signifiers of skulls and laying out Ophelia's dress as substitute for her body. Not only did this feel anomalous in the context of an otherwise minimalistic aesthetic, but it also created an unnecessary and distracting cognitive dissonance. Instead of attending to the details of the scene, I found myself trying to "read" the significance of the clothing. Was it a reference to the outward show of garments? Or perhaps a rebuttal of the fetishizing male gaze? Or was it a desacralization of the mourning ritual – what Derrida calls a quest to "ontologize remains" (9)? It was regrettable that these incongruities appeared so near the end of the performance, as they somewhat diluted the production's overall treatment of gender. However, with the benefit of a few days' critical distance, they can be dismissed as minor concerns. It was the innovative, bold and subversive casting of Maxine Peake, the very aspect that Mark Lawson would write off as "making the play seem different", that gave this production of *Hamlet* its feeling of vitality and relevance. It is perhaps no coincidence that Phyllida Lloyd embarked on a similarly revisionary de-gendering venture in her production of *Henry IV* at the Donmar Warehouse. However, as I will argue, the effects were vastly different.

In her analysis of cross-gender performance, Elizabeth Klett argues that all-female casts, as used by Phyllida Lloyd, are "less challenging to normative ideologies of gender" than selective cross-gendering, as in Frankcom's *Hamlet* (168). Central to Klett's premise is the argument that it is easier to see beyond gender and accept cross-casting as no more than a dramatic convention if all the actors are female. However, we need only look to the practice of all-male casting in the Elizabethan theatre for evidence to the contrary. Although critical consensus on the reception of early modern cross-gendered performance is far from united, anti-theatrical tracts reveal anxieties about the morally polluting effects of boys-playing-girls. As Robert Weimann has explained, the early modern period was a turning point for acting styles, with medieval practices of "presentation" (anti-naturalist

theatrical practice) giving way to the burgeoning style of "impersonation" (naturalist practice) (21). Although modern audiences are accustomed to television-style realism in their theatres, Elizabethan playgoers were more familiar with the artifice of presentational-style performances. In this context, the performance of gender would have been foregrounded *as* performance. Far from unquestioningly accepting all-male casts and cross-gender playing as a mere theatrical convention, it is fair to assume that the Elizabethan audience, like the audience attending Lloyd's *Henry IV*, were acutely aware of the gap between actor and character (Barker).

The conceit of Phyllida's Lloyd's *Henry IV* was, like her 2012 cross-gendered production of *Julius Caesar*, a "performance" of Shakespeare in a female prison. In the tradition of early modern dramatic practice, it exploited the meta-theatrical capital to be gained from staging a play-within-a-play by confronting audiences, through its palimpsestic layering of different realities, with both the mechanics of the theatre *and* the performative nature of gender. However, unlike the Elizabethan boy-players, who wore easily identifiable signifiers to draw attention to their assumption of "femininity", Lloyd's female actors were not impersonating the male characters but rather de-gendering them. By denying the male–female dialectic, they exposed gender difference as a discursive formation rather than a biological given. Like Peake's Hamlet, their shapeless prison clothes and androgynous hairstyles both deconstructed stereotypes and challenged the objectification of women within the visual economy of the "male gaze". Moreover, the prison frame allowed for eruptions of the "real" that intermittently pierced the theatrical illusion, complicating the real/artifice dichotomy with its Brechtian-style alienation effects. During Falstaff and Hal's misogynistic teasing of Mistress Quickly ("Why, she's neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her" (*1 Henry IV*, 3.3.127–28), for instance, the two actors began ad-libbing ("She's so loose, doing her feels like a sausage in a wind-sock"). As the jokes became ever more sexually explicit, the actor playing Quickly ran off-stage crying. At this point, Harriet Walter coaxed her back onto the stage and berated the two miscreants, muttering "stick to the script … [pause] … Shakespeare's script". These meta-theatrical moments, not always comedic in tone as will be discussed below, jolted spectators out of what Bert O. States calls the "security of the stage illusion" (93), forcing them instead to consider its processes and mechanics.

The female-to-male cross-dressing conceit underpinning this production thus represented not merely a re-dressing of the canon, but a subversive attack against gender inequities within the theatre, the judicial system and in society today. Moreover, in a case of life imitating art, two of the actors (Jennifer Joseph and Katie Robinson) were themselves ex-offenders and graduates of Clean Break Theatre, an education programme founded in 1979 by two women prisoners to "deliver theatre opportunities to women whose lives have been affected by the criminal justice system" (Clean Break Website). This dizzying display of blurred boundaries and layered identities created an excess of signification, requiring spectators not only to shift between different spatial and temporal realities, but also, in the process, to re-examine implicit assumptions about gender, power, and the disenfranchised in society more generally.

The "performance" of *Henry IV* began 15 minutes before the official start of the play. Audience members were led by ushers/"prison wardens" past the front of the theatre, whose main entrance had been boarded up with plasterboard bearing a list of "HM Prison" rules and regulations. Entering through a side door, we were confronted with the visual and aural signifiers of a prison visiting room: plastic, institutional-style chairs that

surrounded the playing space on three sides; ambient sounds of jangling keys and closing doors; and officious tannoy announcements ("any mobile phones will be confiscated"). As the lights dropped, a klaxon sounded and the prisoners filed into the playing space from a door at the back of the stage. An over-excited inmate, who later turned out to be playing the part of Hal, leaped up and down shouting "I'm getting out, I'm getting out!" The significance of this was to become clear in the final moments of the play when the actor playing Falstaff, having been rejected by a newly crowned Hal, broke down and became hysterical. Wardens stepped in and cuffed her, leading her off as, clearly distressed and afraid, she sobbed "No. Please." This required de-coding on two levels: for in her capacity as Falstaff, she was reacting to being rejected by her old pal Hal ("I know thee not old man" (*2 Henry IV*, 5.3.47)), while in the role of prisoner, she was responding to the imminent release of her cell-mate. As she was taken out through a door at the back of the stage, unanswered questions hung over the uncomfortable silence: was she being led off to solitary confinement; to be forcibly sedated; or something far worse?

In her absence, the players resumed their roles, and Hal, taking her position on the balcony at the back of the stage, repeated the words uttered by King Henry in the opening soliloquy: "So shaken as we are, so wan with care" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.1). Never before had those words been loaded with so much meaning. If theatre, by its very nature, demands a "double vision" of its spectators (one that sees the actor and one that sees the character), then this play was to require a "triple vision", taking in at one and the same time the actors, the female prisoner characters of the frame, and the characters of the play-within-the-play.

In keeping with the modern prison conceit, Lloyd presented a diverse range of actors incorporating multiple ethnic origins, regional accents and body types that went against the grain of conventional type-casting practices. We were presented, among others, with an Irish Hal, a Northern Northumberland of Asian origin, a black cockney Hotspur and a Scottish Lady Percy. In his assessment of Lloyd's casting agenda, Michael Billington was thus wide of the mark when he noted that "by casting black actors as the rebels, Lloyd hints at the ethnic divisions within society". The point of the apparently random casting choices was surely to foreground the contingency of subject–object binarisms and disrupt normative hierarchies of race, gender and class. Moreover, Lloyd's message about the dangers of "divisions within society" went beyond those based merely on ethnicity, to incorporate all marginalised subjects. In spite of this all-embracing approach, however, it was the plight of women in the criminal justice system that provided the overarching frame for this production.

Productions of women-only Shakespeare are yet to attain the status afforded to their all-male equivalents, who continue to derive their legitimacy from citation of early modern male–female cross-gender performance. However, by staging her production in a prison (the locus of many all-female Shakespearean productions (Aaron 152)), Lloyd not only highlighted the plight of the marginalized female subject within the criminal justice system, but conspicuously reclaimed all-female Shakespeare from the margins and placed it firmly within the West End theatrical mainstream. Although much of Shakespeare's text was inevitably sacrificed in the edit (the two parts of *Henry IV* were condensed into one 2-hour play), the gains more than made up for what was lost. Unlike Frankcom, who explored gendered behaviour through one of Shakespeare's most "feminine" male characters, Lloyd appropriated these most masculine of plays to subvert not only an androcentric tradition of historical narrativization, but also the normative parameters of gendered behaviour. While Peake's androgynous performance of Hamlet was a theatrical

tour de force that challenged preconceptions of female actors playing male roles, Lloyd's *Henry IV* had a far more collaborative feel. For by casting a celebrated Shakespearean thespian alongside less experienced actors, she created a company that, while technically inconsistent, nonetheless practised its own message of inclusivity.

Albeit wildly contrasting in terms of aesthetics, dramatic concept and textual fidelity, these two productions used a combination of gender/colour-blind casting, actor doubling, role re-gendering and textual excisions/interpolations to demystify not only the artifice of theatre, but also the artifice underpinning the "performance" of all social behaviour. By forcing the audience to experience these two plays from an unfamiliar, or to use a Brechtian term, "defamiliarized" perspective, the directors succeeded in creating theatrical experiences that were thought-provoking, revelatory and thoroughly entertaining. While both productions had moments that felt strained or unnecessarily distracting, and while also acknowledging that radical reinterpretations of canonical favourites might not be to everyone's taste, I believe that Lloyd and Frankcom have laid down the gauntlet for a more inclusive approach to casting across the theatrical landscape. For, in spite of some questionable directorial decisions, their experiments with gender not only challenged normative assumptions, but also, as the "abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (2.2.527–28), reflected a society in which doubt prevails over certainty, and established binarisms are gradually being replaced with heterogeneity, indeterminacy and multiplicity.

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