Shakespeare and gender: the ‘woman’s part’

In Shakespeare's day, female parts were played by male actors, while more recently, actresses have taken on some of his most famous male roles such as Hamlet and Julius Caesar. Clare McManus explores gender in the history of Shakespeare performance.

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. Actresses have long claimed their right to Olympian roles like Hamlet: Sarah Bernhardt’s 1899 performance sits in a long tradition, most recently added to by Maxine Peake in her performance at Manchester’s Royal Exchange in 2014.

Bernhardt’s performance divided audiences: this was certainly at least partly to do with the crossing of gender boundaries, with one early London reviewer revealing how polarised ideas of gender could be when he complained that ‘A woman is positively no more capable of beating out the music of Hamlet than is a man of expressing the plaintive and half-accomplished surrender of Ophelia’.[1]

That said, it had become increasingly common by the turn of the 20th century for star actresses to take male parts, often called ‘breeches’ roles, and it is possible that one difficulty for London audiences lay in the fact that Bernhardt’s Hamlet was not Shakespeare’s text but a prose translation.

Over a century later, Maxine Peake’s interpretation was widely praised, though reviewers still focussed on the presence of a female actor in the role, contextualising it against the rich history of female Hamlets and interrogating the opportunities open to women in theatre in the early 21st century.[2]
The French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, crossed gender boundaries when she played the male hero in *Hamlet*.

The feminist principle that skilled female actors should have equality of access to meaty theatrical parts lay behind the all-female production of *Julius Caesar* directed by Phyllida Lloyd at the Donmar Warehouse in 2012, in which Frances Barber took the title role and Cush Jumbo played Mark Antony opposite Harriet Walter’s Brutus. This production deliberately offered its performers a far greater range and number of roles than the standard repertory usually allows. This is partly so because modern repertory stands in the long shadow of Shakespearean casting conditions. The stages of the earlier 17th-century commercial theatres were all-male preserves: women were part of the play-going audience and worked in the theatre buildings but they did not act on the commercial stages. So when *Hamlet* was first staged in 1600–01 and *Julius Caesar* in 1599, female roles were taken by a small cohort of highly trained boys.

The small number of female roles in each play (usually no more than three or four roles that could be described as more than walk-on parts), have shaped and constrained opportunities for actresses on the modern stage.

This kind of Shakespearean casting has been explored by productions such as the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre’s *Twelfth Night* in 2002. In having the parts of Olivia and Viola taken by Mark Rylance and Eddie Redmayne, respectively, the Globe production partially recovered the casting practices of Shakespeare’s own time and, in asking audiences to focus on the actor’s skill rather than gender, examined both contemporary gender roles and their relationship to performance itself.
Women and Shakespeare in the early 20th century

Shakespearean theatre’s habit of exploring gender’s multiple possibilities, and indeed women’s central involvement in this exploration, is not a recent phenomenon. During World War I, in a hut in Bloomsbury built to offer respite for soldiers on leave from the front, a group of pro-suffrage women called on a heady mix of Shakespeare and patriotism to authorise their performances.

Ellen Terry, one of the most famous actresses of her day and herself a performer at the Shakespeare Hut, wrote that a debt was owed to Shakespeare ‘for his vindication of women in [his] fearless, high-spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines’.

Inside the Hut, actresses performed Shakespearean pageants for the troops: on one occasion Terry herself played the cross-dressing Portia of *The Merchant of Venice* while younger actresses performed scenes from *Henry V*. This echoed earlier suffragist work that had appropriated carefully chosen female characters such as Portia or the charismatic Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), using Shakespeare to both inspire and legitimise political action.
The Victorian actress, Ellen Terry, praised Shakespeare for his ‘fearless, high-spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines’.

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Henry Irving as Shylock and Ellen Terry as Portia
Ellen Terry as the cross-dressing Portia, a woman who disguises herself as a male lawyer.

At times, though, Shakespeare has become an authority figure for writers to kick against in despair. In 1929, several years after the Bloomsbury Shakespeare pageants, Virginia Woolf gave a very different picture of Shakespeare's relationship to women's lived experience. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes, 'Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say'. Famously, Woolf then laments Judith's short, frustrated life: denied education and theatrical training, having fled her Stratford home for London, she commits suicide when she finds herself pregnant. It is a moving, deeply thoughtful account. And yet it is not the whole story. Almost 100 years later, new facts have emerged about women's relationship to theatre in the 17th century and, while it's true that we to reimagine Judith Shakespeare now she would still not be able to act on the commercial stage, she would have been aware of women who did have access to education and who were actually required to train in the performing arts of dance, eloquence and music. This is a new history of women and early theatre, and for it we have to look back to the 17th century, first to the Restoration, then to Shakespeare's own time.

*A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf
The first English actress?

On 8 December 1660 something remarkable happened. That day, a woman, probably Anne Marshall (later Quin, or Guin), took to the stage of London’s Vere Street Theatre to play Desdemona in a production of *Othello*: Marshall is the first recorded professional actress to take a Shakespearean role and she would go on to have a long, albeit patchy career in the London theatre. Her performance has an air of backstreet mystery and, in a prologue written especially for it, Thomas Jordan excites his audience with a provocative backstage glimpse of the actress:

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.

Just as Shakespeare’s *Othello* will demand ‘ocular proof’ about his wife’s character and behaviour (3.3.360), the English Restoration theatre audience seem to need to have the presence of the woman on stage ‘proved’ to them by the implicit revelation of her body to their gaze. As is clear from the frontispiece of *Othello* in Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition, this voyeuristic impulse characterises much of Restoration theatre.
Boy actors and the ‘all-male stage’

As we know, and as Thomas Jordan’s prologue makes very clear, prior to Marshall, women did not play Shakespearean roles. Instead, the practice of casting boy actors in female parts meant that the playful exploration of gender was written into these plays from the start. Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre used cosmetics and cross-dressing to exploit audiences’ awareness that they were watching a boy playing a female character and to tease them with that knowledge. So, to return to Twelfth Night (1600–01), its early audiences saw a boy actor playing the part of Viola, who then disguises herself as a boy called Cesario. Shakespeare’s theatre layered gender roles to tantalise audiences, drawing on the virtuosic skill of the highly trained young men (aged between 12 and 21 years old) who played these complex female characters. Not that the boy-as-woman was universally accepted: those opposed to the theatre feared that cross-dressing would corrupt its audience and destroy the distinction between the sexes. Much of this fear and much of the energy of Shakespeare’s cross-dressed dramas depends on desire. In Twelfth Night, for instance, Viola/Cesario quickly falls in love with her new master, Orsino, and he himself seems to desire his new page, hinting at his pleasure in the layering of male and female as he describes Cesario:

they shall yet belie thy happy years,
That say thou art a man. Diana’s lip
Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman’s part. (1.4.30–34)

What’s perhaps most striking here is that there is no attempt to hide the presence of the boy playing the female role; in fact, attention is drawn to it because the ‘woman’s part’ refers both to the absent female body and the theatrical ‘part’ of Viola that the boy performs. Such moments revel in the layering of gender identity and disguise.

Photograph of Michael Brown as Viola/Cesario and Rhys Meredith as Sebastian in Shakespeare’s Globe production of *Twelfth Night*, 2002

Men playing women disguised as men: Michael Brown as Viola/Cesario (right), alongside Rhys Meredith as Sebastian.

Women and Shakespearean theatre: a new history

Pivotal as it was, Anne Marshall’s star turn as Desdemona did not change English theatre overnight. For one thing, boy actors performed female roles well into the Restoration. In 1660 Pepys famously called Edward Kynaston, one of the last of these boys, ‘the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life, only her voice not very good’. What’s more, Marshall may have been a pioneer but, as she stepped out onto the Vere Street stage, she took her place in a long line of theatrical Englishwomen who, though absent from the early 17th-century playhouse stages, did in fact perform in a range of other venues and ways. Two extreme examples offer a glimpse into this alternative history of women and Shakespearean theatre.
The first theatrical woman is a notorious London underworld figure: the cross-dressing fence Mary Frith, aka Moll Cutpurse (c. 1584–1659). In late April or early May 1611, an astonishing spectacle unfolded at the Fortune playhouse. At a performance of Middleton and Dekker’s *Roaring Girl*, a sanitised version of Frith’s life, Moll Cutpurse herself watched from the side of the stage as a boy acted her part. Once the play was over, Frith took up a lute, played, sang and taunted the crowd that many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman.[4]

Close to the stage yet not truly on it, the cross-dressed Frith offers a glimpse into the ways costume and gender roles could be exploited both on and off stage.

The second theatrical woman emphatically takes centre stage. Queen Anna of Denmark (1574–1619), wife of King James VI and I, commissioned and performed in the lavish theatricals of the Jacobean court masque. Luxurious one-off events that employed the court’s full resources, the masque had elite performance at its heart and, in the first years of the 17th century, women were the masque’s main performers. On the court stage, Anna and her women took silent, symbolic roles, creating meaning through the display and movement of their bodies. In fact, court masques often exposed the female body, giving the invited audience visible proof of the difference between the noblewomen and the cross-dressed boys who acted alongside them and took the speaking roles that the silent women were denied. This is at an extreme in Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens*, performed at court in 1609. In it, Anna and her ladies danced as exalted queens of history, banishing grotesque witches played by male performers in female dress.

**Paintings of London in the friendship album of Michael van Meer, c. 1614-1615**

![Queen Anna’s signature and coat of arms, 1614.](image)
Inigo Jones designs for masque costumes

Design for a costume to be worn by an aristocratic woman performing in a masque at King James’s court, c. 1610.

Autograph manuscript of Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens*, 1609
Queen Anna and her ladies performed silent roles in Jonson’s masque, while professional male performers in female dress played the speaking parts.

Women, then, were far more involved in Shakespearean theatre than either Woolf’s lament for Judith Shakespeare’s lost talent or Anne Marshall’s starring moment in December 1660 might suggest. History has changed, bringing to light a long and energetic tradition of women’s involvement in Shakespearean theatre against which we can judge the interventions of our own day.

Footnotes


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