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From Casting to Casting Away Gender: Cross-Gendering in Modern Shakespeare Performance

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Abstract: The Elizabethan practice of cross-dressing added much to the reading of the plays. From the display of the male sexual desires to protection of women in the public sphere, all issues were closely looked at. However, the 20th century investigated the cross-dressing motif in many theatrical and film performances with a slight change. Several directors cast women in the role of famous Shakespeare male protagonists. This paper shall explore this move and see how it adds or changes meaning in the reading of the plays, in theatre performances and films.

Keywords: Gender, Cross-dressing, Cross-gendering and fluidity.

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The year 1660 marked an important juncture in the English theatre. Not only was monarchy restored in England but Charles II also allowed women to enter the stage. Thus, women replaced the young adolescent males who cross-dressed in order to portray the women characters in Shakespeare's plays. Although, the cross-dressing motif might seem strange to some, this practice can be traced back to Ancient Greeks who did not allow women to enter the stage and

therefore, men had to wear costumes and masks to represent women. Shakespearean critics, on the other hand, have been divided over the use of 'cross-dressing' in his plays. Questions like does Shakespeare use the motif to bring out the fluidity of gender or was he functioning within the gender constraints of his time in the best way he knew, are dealt with time and again. However, the 20th century witnessed a renewed interest in cross-dressing motif in many films and theatrical performances but with a slight difference. Several directors and production houses cast women in the role of famous Shakespearean male protagonists. The paper will explore this move of casting/ re-casting and shed light on how these changes impact the readings of Shakespeare's plays. In theatre and films, the paper shall concentrate on the performance by L.A. Women's Shakespeare Company and performances by Sarah Bernhardt, Asta Neilson, Helen Mirren and Lisa Wolpe, and explore the nuances of gender roles in their performances.

In the last century, the perception of gender has evolved in many different ways. Gender was no longer seen in terms of biological or anatomical but social and cultural. For Judith Butler, Gender is a cultural construct formed through repeated 'acting' which gives the notion of a static gender while at the same time obscuring the instability of a person's gender act (Butler 179). In this sense, cross-dressing in Shakespeare becomes an important motif as it supports the fluidity of gender characteristic. Cross-dressing, according to Marjorie Garber, points to the 'constructedness of gender categories' (Garber 9). She further suggests that there is a tendency to look beyond cross-dressing or 'transvestism' as it challenges the binary of 'female and 'male'. Garber is careful not to call it the 'third sex'; instead she classifies it as 'third' which puts into question "identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded and known" (Garber 13). Keeping this in mind it is also important to answer certain questions regarding the cross-dressing motif. Questions such as does the use of cross-dressing motif point towards an interest in the historical practices or does it bring out the contemporary debate around gender? Secondly, what is accomplished by using this motif: blurring of the gender differences or the heightening of the same? Lastly it is important to map the changes in the relationship between characters when one or more are cross-gendered.

Sarah Bernhardt, a French stage and silent film actress, at the age of 55 starred in her production of Hamlet which was based on a new prose translation by Marcel Schwob and Paul Morand. This short movie by Bernhardt in 1901 received mixed reviews and was declared the

most controversial performance by the actress because the character of Hamlet was being portrayed by a woman (acting like a man). This however, was not a new form of experimentation ushered in by the actress of the silent era. Post-Restoration, Sarah Siddons and Charlotte Clarke were well known 18th century actresses who played the troubled prince of Denmark. The movie *Le duel d'Hamlet* is a two minute film which shows Bernhardt dressed in princely attire dueling with Laertes. The London critics were extremely critical of her portrayal calling it 'pretentious'. However, Sarah Bernhardt does not conceal her being a woman on stage affectively. Her hairstyle is more feminine and her breasts are very much visible under her costume. This would have immediately made the audience aware that Sarah Bernhardt is a female actress playing the role of a man. It is important to understand the role of cross-dressing in case of Bernhardt. Jennifer Drouin suggests that cross-dressing is of three kinds: -"a) theatrical, a practice... rooted in necessity, b) Drag, a humourous parody of hetero-normative behaviour and c) passing, a subversive infiltration of society that attempts to occlude difference" (Bulman 15). These distinctions, according to Drouin, are fluid and depend upon the character's intention and audience's perception. Bernhardt cross-dresses like a man but remains feminine in some aspects, thus making her cross-dressing uphold all three distinctions within cross-dressing, leading to several mixed reviews. Nevertheless, Bernhardt's movie arrives at a critical point. In Europe, Shakespeare stepped out of the theatre and entered the medium of film. Releasing within two years of the first silent Shakespeare film (*King John* in 1899), Bernhardt introduced the first video evidence of a woman acting as a man. The diversified criticism can also be traced to the perception of Hamlet as a character during the 18th and 19th century. The Romantic criticism type cast Hamlet as a brooding intellectual lost in a deep philosophical thought process. Sarah Bernhardt herself proclaimed that she cannot see Hamlet as a man. On the other hand Edward Vining, a late 19th century scholar extends this argument by suggesting that the effeminacy of Hamlet can be explained by a simple solution, that he is in fact a woman.

Vining's book *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881) departs from all trends of criticism on the play. Vining suggests that "the charms of Hamlet's mind are essentially feminine in nature" (47). Hamlet's gentle behaviour, dependence upon others and wining through indirect means make for Vining's conclusion that Hamlet is in fact a woman. Vining gives an alternate

background story, according to which the day Hamlet was born; the Old Hamlet was wounded in a battle against Fortinbras. With the Old Hamlet severely injured, the Queen lies about the gender of the baby so that inheritance to the throne is not lost. Thus, the girl grows up as the young Dane Hamlet, hiding behind men's clothes and behaviour. This book also becomes the inspiration for the silent German movie *Hamlet* (1920). Directed by Svend Gade, the movie was much appreciated for its casting as it had the critically acclaimed Danish actress Asta Nielsen playing the role of Hamlet. Asta Nielsen has a complex role as she acts as a kind of "double agent" (Crowl 5). Firstly, Nielsen has to hide the true gender of her character and secondly, she has to expose the truth behind Claudius's claim to the throne. Nielson's cross-dressing is somewhat more convincing than that of Bernhardt as she styles herself according the fashion of the young men. Nielson has a hairstyle similar to that of Horatio and Laertes and her costume is able to conceal her breasts. However, the motif of cross-dressing and cross-gendering occur together in this movie. The dynamics of several relations are changed and the audience sometimes struggle to keep up with the changes from the original. In the movie, Hamlet being a woman falls in love with her close friend Horatio who in turn falls in love with Ophelia. Hamlet then courts Ophelia in order to keep Horatio for herself.

The movie brings together two issues that is the homo-social alliance between men and the insecurity of a woman in permanent disguise, about her gender and sexuality. Horatio being unaware of Hamlet's natural gender (woman) upholds fraternal values. Hamlet on the other hand has to follow gender norms and hide her love for Horatio while trying to avenge the death of her father, implying that the character of Hamlet is trapped in a mesh of hetero-normative behaviour. While Hamlet is a woman in love with Horatio, her identity makes her careful as to not be branded as a homosexual. It is interesting to notice the use of the cross-dressing motive in the movie as it is not the actor but the character that cross-dresses. Hamlet in the movie disrupts the binary of genders; as she is a woman in love with a man, courting a woman and cross-dressing to act like a man. In this sense, cross-dressing in the movie becomes what Majorie Garber calls 'Transvestite Theatre' which "recognizes that all characters are impersonators" (40). Thus, Nielson as Hamlet covers her chest in a state of panic throughout the movie, which gets partially exposed in front of Horatio every time. Horatio's discovery of Hamlet's gender is also problematic. Throughout the film, Horatio pines for the love of Ophelia, even at the graveyard scene. However, after the dueling match between Laertes and Hamlet, he

embraces his dying friend in a manner similar to Romeo's embrace. It is after the death of Hamlet that Horatio discovers that Hamlet is a woman when he touches latter's breasts. Despite being shocked he kisses Hamlet on her lips leaving many unanswered questions. Horatio says "too late to be lovers" (Reel 6) after Hamlet's death. This give rise to the question that did he love Hamlet all along? And if he did, which Hamlet did he love, the man he went to the university with or the woman whose identity is revealed after her death? These questions reflect on the play of gender throughout the movie. If Horatio was in love with Hamlet the man, then the former also concealed his love in order for them not to be declared a homosexual couple. But if he loved Hamlet, the woman, then in an instant he realised his love for her. In both cases, Horatio meets Hamlet when the latter is in disguise of a man. This says as much about Horatio's preferences (fetishism if one may) as it does about Hamlet's gender troubles. In this case the cross-dressing, cross-gendering and the shifting dynamics of relationships, point to the fluidity of gender, thereby adding much to the contemporary debate about the same.

Helen Mirren's character in Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* (2010) offers a different kind of cross-gendering at play. Unlike Gade's Hamlet where the protagonist is woman acting like a man, Mirren's character is re-gendered. Instead of the usurped Duke Prospero, one witnesses Prospera. This re-gendering is not new to the theatrical world as Richard Garner directed the same play for the Georgia Shakespeare Festival in 2003. In Garner's production, the audience witnessed Prospera along with Gonzala and Antonia but in Taymor's adaptation Prospera is the only change in the original script. However, Taymor adds much to the reading of gender in the play by replacing the father-daughter relationship to that of the mother-daughter relationship. Cross-dressing as a motive is used in the movie but it performs a much different function than the earlier known. Helen Mirren who plays Prospera is not unknown to the world of Shakespearean performance and cross-dressing. In the 1978 BBC production of *As You Like It* (directed by Basil Coleman), Mirren plays the role of Rosalind who cross-dresses as Ganymede to protect herself from the violent world of men. However, in *The Tempest* (2010) a woman who is alone on the island with her daughter needs to cross-dress for establishing her authority. In the film, Prospera's character as a woman changes the nature of relationship between almost all characters. This can be explained by the fact that Prospera at any given point of time plays

several roles that is mother, usurped duchess, colonizer and witch/sorceress. Prospera's character in the movie is that of an educated and independent woman dedicated to the study of alchemy and natural sciences. Post her exile she uses the same powers to free Ariel and enslaves Caliban. In the play, the gender of Ariel is not clearly defined but one knows that Caliban could have been male as he attempted to rape Miranda.

The film, on the other hand shows that both as males who exist in close proximity of Prospera and this adds much to the interpretation of relationship between them. When Prospera reminds Ariel of his horrible past, he collapses on the ground naked and crosses his legs in a manner as to indicate that he has been emasculated. Moreover, the several embraces between Prospera and Ariel hint towards more sexualized relationship between the two. In case of Caliban the hint of sexual tension between him and Prospera become more apparent. Lines like 'thou strok'st me and made much of me' (1.2.333) and 'this thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine' (5.1.274-5) acquire new meaning. One cannot help but wonder whether Prospera rules over the inhabitants of the island by suppressing them sexually. Another aspect of Prospera is her interest in the study of natural sciences, magic and alchemy. Prospera flouts several norms of the society by taking command over the kingdom, secondly by educating herself and lastly showing interest in magic. Over the years necromancy has been a sensitive subject and been declared as blasphemous by the Church. In 16th century, one could escape the charge of adultery but the practice of witchcraft and magic was punishable by death. Documents like *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) defined methods of torture for the witches, which led to the death of thousands of free-thinking women across Europe. In that sense, one wonders how Prospera was not burnt at a stake for her treason. Prospera's knowledge makes her at par with Sycorax (Caliban's mother) as both were powerful witches. Prospera, as a woman acquires the status of a colonizer which as a concept is either abstract or does not exist. Prospera's position as a colonizer is highly problematic because changing of the gender of the colonizer does not allow the notion of race to be removed or lessened in any manner. Post-colonial theories have often seen a woman's body as a space where major power struggles and battles are fought, be it cultural or spatial. But in the case of Prospera, her position gets reversed as she does not become a victim but a symbol of oppression.

However, Taymor's use of the costume is very unique in the film. Prospera, while inhabiting the island dresses up in doublet and hose with the cloak and short hair. The significance of this move can be traced to her position in society as a woman. Cross-dressing here symbolizes a means of disguise not to protect oneself but a method of exercising power. While on the island Prospera needs to control Ariel and Caliban, which she accomplishes by acquiring the symbol of power in society, which is dressing up like a man. When the moment of reclaiming her Duchy arrives she wears the corset again. This action can be explained by the fact that on the island away from civilization she can cross-dress but going back to her dukedom she has to follow the norms of dressing according to gender. Cross-dressing in public could have adverse effects as it could remind the people of her status as a witch or Renaissance fear of women dressed as men replacing men could be realized and threaten her reign again. These are the fears that Prospera internalizes before returning to Milan and she responds to Miranda's wonder of the "Brave new world" (5.1.206) with a mixture of warning and pity (for the lack of knowing) by "Tis new to thee" (5.1.208).

The next actor that redefined gender fluidity in theatre is Lisa Wolpe. Besides acting she is also a director, teacher and producer. She founded the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company in 1993 of which she is also the artistic director. Blessed with an androgynous face she easily slips in and out of Shakespearean characters of both genders. In an interview titled 'Is this Normal', Lisa Wolpe calls herself the 'Drag King' as opposed to 'Drag Queen'. She suggests that not everybody is a drag-king and those who are do not practice it for the same reason as she does which is 'a reflection of the reverberations' of her own identity than play-acting on the stage. Her most admired performance is her portrayal of the villain Iago from *Othello* in Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender. Wolpe in this performance used her own experience in order to discuss gender and its relation to Shakespeare. She is well versed with not only the transcripts of almost plays but also the performance by other female actors. Cross-dressing is most important tool used by Wolpe in her performances. Her portrayal of Iago differs from that of Bernhardt's Hamlet as she cross-dresses as a man in order to play the role of man in a masculine manner. Supporting a well-trimmed stubble, neatly parted short hair and an army uniform, Wolpe is able to overcome the obstacle of gender binary. Jennifer Druoin suggests that

'Drag' is of two kinds: - one which is the traditional parodic form used in cabaret and the second being non-parodic which is produced by "the fluidity of gender boundaries in everyday life" (Bulman 29). This non-parodic form of drag is governed by 'self-referentiality', meaning that it draws attention to its own 'artificiality'. Druoin further suggests that this 'artificiality' is in contrast to the third form of cross-dressing, the 'passing', the main aim of which is to remain inside the "fixed sex-driven categories" (Bulman 31). It is the space between the non-parodic drag and passing within which lies Wolpe's method. Wolpe's cross-dressing on the stage to act like a man while being aware of the audience's knowledge of her gender, is counter-acted by the desire to remain genuinely masculine in order to make the audience forget about her gender.

Lisa Wolpe's company (LAWSC) also bring out certain problems related to economics and funding of all-female cast productions. Melissa D. Aaron points out that the "all-male productions come at a cost: the cost of not hiring women" (Bulman 151). This is significant because of the superior status of all-male productions as the audience is more accepting of the all-male productions who are considered more authentic in terms following historical traditions (of the theatre). While on stage talented female actors like Lisa Wolpe perform with vigour and fidelity (to the character and gender), all-female cast on a regular basis suffer from the lack of funding.

Cross-dressing and Cross-gendering in contemporary age cannot be tied down by a single performance or specific production house. Although, they found their origin in Ancient Greece, they have survived the test of antiquity. Since early 20th century there has been constant endeavour to define and re-define gender and sexuality. Gender lost its status as the fixed binary system based on biological differences and one of the most important evidence used to interpret gender became the study of theatre and its practices (like cross-dressing). This in turn allowed the Queer theorists and scholars to deconstruct cross-dressing. While Marjorie Garber suggests that 'transvestism' gave rise to the 'third', a concept which challenges any binary be it gender, nation or self; Jennifer Drouin carefully divides cross-dressing into three categories, none of them being fixed and constantly intersecting each other. Women, who were missing from the Shakespearean stage, now provide an alternate reading of the same. While Sarah Bernhardt gives to the world a feminine Hamlet, Asta Nielson's performance as a female Hamlet gave to the world a new way of performing. Within 20th century, there have been several actresses who carried on the

tradition of playing Hamlet. Sarah Bernhardt, Asta Nielsen, Frances De la Tour, Ruth Mitchell and Maxine Peake are some of the most well-known actresses who were either cast as Hamlet, the prince or Hamlet, the princess. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Cross-gendering on the contemporary theatre and films has evolved over the years. Cross-gendering, like gender (and cross-dressing) has become multi-faceted in terms of experience and awareness for the actor, character and the audience. In that sense performance by Helen Mirren, Lisa Wolpe and Frances de La Tour is derived much out of their own experience of cross-dressing for the stalk roles of Viola and Rosalind to reflect on the instability of identity in cross-gendered roles. While plays by Shakespeare have been thoroughly scrutinised for the role of gender in them, the gendering of the cast production houses also highlights a kind of a denial to the entry of the stage. Gender (and cross-dressing), then become a quicksand, engulfing the projected identity in order to release what is felt.

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