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“Actions That a Man Might Play”

Hamlet, Gender Anxiety, and the History of the Breeches Role

Like many other reviewers of Ruth Negga’s Hamlet (2020), Constance Grady glows with praise for the title character: “This *Hamlet* really does belong to Negga… Negga owns the stage… no matter who has political power in Denmark at any given moment, it’s Negga who has all the power on the stage, and she never lets us forget it” (Grady). Grady also points her readers toward the history of women playing Shakespeare’s most recognizable tragic hero, starting with Fanny Furnival in 1741, before concluding by triumphantly announcing that Negga “proves that 300 years after Fanny Furnival’s famous turn, casting a woman as Hamlet can be far more than a publicity stunt” (Grady). But Grady’s final sentence belies her anxiety. If Negga’s Hamlet *isn’t* a “publicity stunt,” why evoke such a framework? Is the default assumption that women playing Hamlet must be a gimmick? Despite Grady’s stated confidence in Negga’s acting, and her review of the history of women as Hamlet, she reveals an implicit anxiety that casting a female actor as Hamlet is something undertaken chiefly for publicity, rather than for substance. Grady’s final sentence adds a heavy pressure to Negga’s performance: not only is she responsible for successfully playing one of the theater’s most iconic characters, she is also responsible for proving that casting a woman in such a role is more than a PR move catering to “woke” audiences.

Grady isn’t alone. Other reviewers similarly struggle to reconcile an apparent desire to affirm the substance of female Hamlets with a fundamental skepticism about the whole thing. But such tensions between sign and substance have not always existed; in fact, it reverses the nineteenth-century tradition of “breeches roles,” where women were accepted as actors in male parts, rather than as instrumental marketing stunts.

Women acting in cross-dressed roles reaches back to the eighteenth century, with women playing young boys and male fairies in Shakespeare (Puck and Ariel being particularly common roles for women), as well as male characters in operas written for a higher register (Russell 137-138). But the nineteenth century saw a distinct rise in women playing serious male characters, particularly in tragedies: “Tragic crossdressing does not seem to have grown directly out of conventional stage practices, which aimed at comedy and/or sexual innuendo. On the contrary, most women who first played tragic male roles approached them with the utmost seriousness” (Russell 138-39). Moreover, “these performances were not seen as gimmicks… Before the modern era, critics treated such portrayals seriously, on their own terms, without reference to cross-gender casting” (Hornby 641). In her historical overview of these “breeches roles” or “trousers roles,” Anne Russell notes that while there were certainly those who criticized the possible moral implications of cross-dressing on stage, it nevertheless became common enough during the nineteenth century that, at its peak, a woman playing Hamlet was accepted on her own terms as an actor among theater critics and audiences. And yet, breeches roles fell gradually out of prominence until “tragic crossdressing was regarded as an eccentric old-fashioned convention” (Russell 138) in the early twentieth century. As several scholars have noted, the rise and fall of breeches roles tracks with changing perceptions of gender roles and sexuality, from women commonly playing male roles in the highly conservative Victorian era dominated by a strict “separate spheres” logic of gender to the period around the first World War, when gender lines blurred as women stepped into jobs left behind by soldiers. Seeing women cross dressing on stage both performed and assuaged anxieties around gender in the nineteenth century. The hyper-constructed nature of theatrical roles (even the physical space of a theater, with audiences spaced at variable distances from the stage, necessitates exaggerated dress, speech, and manner) lends itself to exploring social constructions of gender, something that Shakespeare himself demonstrates in comedies like *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* that layer elements of cross-dressing into the plot. In this essay, I will explore how Ruth Negga’s rendering of Hamlet slips between the boundaries of cross-dressing, androgyny, and gender fluidity, and serves as metonymic for twenty-first century movements toward a social understanding of gender.

While women in male roles – especially Hamlet and Romeo, along with a handful of other Shakespearean men and some contemporary parts – were common and broadly accepted during the nineteenth century, Richard Hornby’s claim that such performances were “treated… without reference to cross-gender casting” (641) is not entirely true. Russell instead argues that “nearly all critical accounts of crossdressed performances attempted to establish the degree of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ of both character and performer, though few reviewers were explicit about how they made these distinctions” (136). Not only did critics comment on a cross-dressed actress’s gender, they did so the effort of establishing how successfully they performed gender on stage. But these assessments contained their own problems, exacerbated by critics’ tendency to neglect providing clear definitions for the terms they used to describe gender performances. The result was “slippage in the use of terms such as ‘unmanly,’ ‘effeminate,’ and ‘feminine,’ and ‘manly’ and ‘mannish.’ Marriott’s Hamlet could be ‘manly’ but not ‘mannish’; Booth imagined a Hamlet both ‘feminine’ and ‘womanly’ without being ‘effeminate.’ (Russell 147-48). Whether or not they acknowledged it (and, speaking generally, they did not), nineteenth-century critics implicitly reveal the flexibility of gendered labels despite the highly rigid boundaries around men and women’s social roles.

The coded gender language that infuses nineteenth-century review culture around women cross-dressing on stage also appears in reviews of Negga’s Hamlet. There are several reviews that, unlike Grady’s, sweep over Negga’s gender altogether. And yet, even these reviews employ coded language that implies Negga’s femininity and seemingly struggles to reconcile it with her male character. Negga/Hamlet “shimmers with the thrill of finally *doing* what has long been talked about” (this being killing his uncle, something one typically does not “shimmer” about), her performance is all about “brightness,” and “her final moments are light, even ecstatic” (Shaw); he is “vulnerable” (Grady) and “the fact that this is a man played by a woman” contributes to a “quickening sensibility” (Brantley). According to these reviewers, Negga’s Hamlet would seem to exude a sense of glittery fairy-brightness that feels incompatible with the character and “emo” (Cote) feel of the production, while Negga’s womanhood contributes to an emotional sensitivity. These descriptions already cue girlishness and femininity, but the even more distinct references to Negga being a woman emerge in their physical descriptions of Hamlet. Reviewers really want you to know that Negga is short: “the 5-foot 3-inch Negga automatically becomes the show’s most vulnerable figure onstage” (Grady); she has “delicate features” and “looks like she stepped out of a boy band” (Cote); “the prince is… a small person… a fine figurine of a man, delicate of frame and feature” (Brantley); the set’s “foggy horror-movie gloom… sets Negga’s elfin beauty off perfectly” (Shaw). Negga *is* small, and *is* a beautiful woman, so many of these comments are justified (although I have yet to work out how a horror-movie-esque set is supposed to set off her “elfin beauty”), but descriptions of her physicality diverge from actual assessments of her stage presence to a strange and condescending need to reiterate how small, “delicate,” and doll-like she is. While these reviews don’t demonstrate “slippage” and ambiguity in gendered terms like nineteenth-century reviews tended to, they do heavily code Hamlet as feminine while self-consciously avoiding most explicit references to Negga’s gender. And as someone who saw Negga as Hamlet on stage in 2020, these reviews almost seem to be about a completely different play; the utterly fail to capture Negga’s intensity, her Hamlet’s simmering rage, or even the power of Hamlet being the only person of color on stage except for the brief appearances of his father’s ghost. But more importantly, this coded language infuses reviews of Negga’s Hamlet with an uncomfortable tension, a dual need to both gender and un-gender the production.

After a long period of prominent cross-dressing actresses, breeches roles began to taper off in popularity between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This decline occurred even as Sarah Bernhardt, among the most prominent woman Hamlets and first person to play the Dane on film, was actively taking male roles: “One might have presumed that Bernhardt, the stage legend, would impose enormous prestige on cross-dress performance and, thereby, revive its failing popularity. However, this was not the case… While the critical reviews of her trouser parts were often excellent, audiences remained cool” (Berlanstein 347-48). The fact that not even Bernhardt could revive the failing popularity of breeches roles sounded their death note. Women who played men on stage began to attract rumors of lesbianism and general “sexual perversion” (Berlanstein 348-49), and as these roles began to have serious consequences for the perception of female actors’ personal lives as well as their public careers, breeches roles could not sustain women trying to make a living. Even Bernhardt, legend though she was, found the need to defensively explain why she took male parts: “It is not male parts, but male brains that I prefer… Generally speaking male parts are more intellectual than female parts. This is the secret of my preference. No female character has opened up a field so large for the exploration of sensations and human sorrows as that of Hamlet” (Bernhardt 159-60). True though Bernhardt’s explanation may be, women even a few years earlier had not needed to put nearly this level of effort into defending their choice to take breeches parts. And this decline, ironically, tracks with a loosening in the rigidity of gender norms in the early twentieth century: “even as interwar fashion was supposed to have all women ‘disguising themselves as men’ – with short, bobbed hair and no corset – male impersonators on stage became ever more the objects of scorn” (Berlanstein 348). As women began to see more freedom in the gender roles that defined their daily lives, opportunities to take male roles on stage dropped off almost entirely.

Scholars have subsequently posited a number of theories as to the decline of breeches roles. Russell points to the stigmas around men expressing passionate emotions as a major motivating factor for casting women in roles perceived as strongly emotional:

Women may have begun to play characters such as Hamlet and Romeo because there was uncertainty and debate in the nineteenth-century theatrical discourse about how to understand and represent the passion of such characters… from the 1830s on expressions of passion, particularly by men, were increasingly seen as problematic in social contexts. Critics often described male characters dominated by passion, emotion, and indecision as ‘feminine,’ ‘feminized,’ or ‘effeminate’… It was ‘passionate’ and/or ‘feminine’ characters who seem to have been chosen by women as suitable for an occasional performance. (Russell 140)

Casting women into male roles, according to Russell, allows for the nobility of these characters to remain intact while justifying their displays of emotion because they were played by women. Lenard Berlanstein, on the other hand, views breeches roles as an exploration of cultural taboo rather than a way of justifying male characters’ perceived femininity:

Stage inversion… peaked in popularity precisely when the ideology of the separate spheres was an unshakable article of faith. The timing of the decline is just as paradoxical, for it occurred as women were laying claim to a greater range of rights and as males were suffering a crisis of masculinity… Inversion functioned as a safety valve: when bipolar gender roles were hegemonic, audiences could seek limited and allowable release in the theater; as the questioning of absolute sexual difference intensified, release became less necessary and inversion lost its attractiveness. (Berlanstein 350-51)

These two perspectives, at first reading, seem unreconcilable. One view claims that breeches roles soothed the anxiety caused by characters so prominently perceived as “noble” acting a bit too emotional, too *feminine*. The other view claims that these roles allowed for subversive play with the ideas of masculinity and femininity at a moment when gender roles were constricting enough to necessitate safe release. I argue that, despite the apparently binary nature of these claims, they are most effectively read as two sides of the same coin.

Gender was highly constructed on the nineteenth-century stage; Russell recounts an incident of actor William Macready suggesting that Helen Faucit ought to wear padded stockings to create the illusion of more muscular legs for her role as Fidele in *Cymbeline*, referencing a male actor who used the same strategy. As Russell points out, “the fact that both male and female performers wore padded stockings suggests the extent to which masculinity was a dramatic construction on the nineteenth-century stage” (146). This constructed nature lends itself to play, just as drag has long acted as a space of play in gender and sexuality for LGBTQ+ people. But at the same time, constructs need support in order to be effective, and “if nineteenth-century women performers of tragic heroes were exploring the boundaries dividing behavior considered masculine and feminine, they were also reinforcing conventional ideas by elevating the figure of the tragic hero” (136) as they justified Hamlet’s inappropriately feminine passion. Ultimately, these multiple layers of gendered representation in breeches roles allowed nineteenth-century anxieties to literally take center stage, all under the reassuringly classic and morally upright veil of Shakespeare. Directors often trimmed dialogue that alluded to sex and scenes that problematized a characters’ nobility, like Hamlet killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in order to maintain an idealized image of Shakespearean heroes and emphasize their moral value. The familiar characters and narratives, meanwhile, function as a kind of cultural shorthand, a way of exploring social issues, tensions, and anxieties without explicitly articulatingthat you’re doing so, which would undermine the delicate balance between reality and mediation.

This elusive balance could be maintained, in part, with female actors’ carefully cultivated public images. Most women in the theater already needed to maintain an image of conventional domesticity off-stage, and this need was even stronger for women who took breeches roles: “Kemble, Cushman, and Tree all worked to represent themselves as dutiful domestic women who put family obligations before personal preference. Interestingly, those family obligations included financial support, not usually considered women’s responsibility in those belonging to or aspiring to the middle classes” (Russell 150). Charlotte Cushman, among the most famous Romeos on the 19th century stage, notoriously lived with a long string of female partners. And yet, her cultivated public image suggested a different life of domesticity, of a woman who took breeches roles not out of personal interest, but out of a desire to support her sister. In an era of extreme conservatism around sexuality – especially women’s sexuality – female actors who took male parts needed to stave off the reputation of their careers as “a profession in which women were assumed to be sexually available” (Russell 151). Women’s efforts to ensure that they had an unimpeachable public image contributed to their ability to question gender on stage just as scripts pruned for ideal morality did. Anyone who could not avoid *ad hominem* attacks in reviews risked the entire moral construction that allowed them the freedom to play male roles.

The moral safety net could be further strengthened by adhering to conventional readings and expectations of performance on stage. Women who took breeches parts typically avoided offering any kind of inventive new take on their characters – particularly the most iconic, like Hamlet and Romeo – instead ensuring that their reading was in line with tradition. Moreover, most women also wore the conventional “Hamlet costume” of the time when playing him, which comprised of a “black velvet doublet with square neck, black velvet minks and circular robe, lined with purple satin and broad bulge trimming, with large gold cord and tassels; black silk hose, shoes and roses, black coronet cap, with black feathers” (Russell 146). As strange as it is today to imagine a standardized and expected Hamlet costume, this particular outfit was practically a necessity in the nineteenth century. Russell even notes an instance when Anna Dickinson “was chastised for wearing purple rather than black” in her 1882 *Hamlet* (147). Staying close to this convention–or at least a slightly altered costume that helped to preserve a woman’s modesty more effectively–allowed women another safeguard against critique. Moreover, adhering to conventions and maintaining a clean public image contribute to a sense of normalcy around the actually boundary-breaking work women were engaging in when they took breeches parts: “By then conforming to stage traditions of performance and costume, nineteenth-century women who played tragic male roles were able, to a remarkable degree, to naturalize their crossing of boundaries” (Russell 152). Negga, on the other hand, has much less of a need to adhere to these kinds of conventions, especially in an era of Shakespeare productions when innovation is the norm. If Negga had worn the traditional “Hamlet costume,” critics would likely have called the choice bizarre rather than appropriate to the role.

Indeed, when Negga took the stage as Hamlet in 2020, she faced an audience with significantly different emotional baggage around gender and the theater than Charlotte Cushman, Sarah Bernhardt, and Alice Marriot encountered in the nineteenth century. Hornby argues in “Cross-Gender Casting” that casting a woman to play a man in, at least, 1996 when the article was published, had become a far less acceptable device: “The ‘cultural relativism’ of our own time sees acting in terms of personality; the actor is supposed to play only himself or herself on stage or in film… Interracial casting is bad enough–classical roles should be limited to whites!–but cross-gender casting goes against nature itself” (641). And yet, this is also an era in which Helen Mirren plays a gender-swapped Prospera in *The Tempest* (2010), Glenda Jackson plays King Lear (2019), Ian McKellen plays an age-blind Hamlet (2021), and Denzel Washington plays Don Pedro in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993). There is even a comedy called *Women Playing Hamlet* (2015) featuring an all-female cast who play both male and female roles, and the all-women, seven-person Shakespeare troupe that I saw enact *Hamlet* in Atlanta (2015) is only one example of the all-female-Shakespeare-troupe trend. Thus Negga playing Hamlet is not an anomaly, but the reviews belie that she must also somehow answer for why she isn’t a publicity stunt. Hornby is not wrong to suggest that cross-gender casting is at least uncommon in major productions–even Mirren plays the definitively-female Prosper*a* instead of an androgynous or cross-dressed Prospero, and most all-women troupes perform in smaller, local productions. To see a woman play a man in an international production of *Hamlet*–it opened in Dublin before coming to Brooklyn–on a major stage, and to critical acclaim in leading journals, seems to require defending Negga’s position more so than edgy, underground, all-women productions. I would also suggest that the fact that Negga’s cross-dress is not part of the drama or visual spectacle of this *Hamlet* adds to reviewers’ confusion; Negga spends her time on stage in either a simple suit in varying degrees of dishevelment or a hoodie and jacket, neither particularly flashy costume choices, and there is no narrative change to highlight her gender as in Mirren’s *Tempest*. While the lack of explicit reference to playing gender in the nineteenth century theaters allowed for subversive questioning without drawing issues of immorality, a twenty-first century audience more used to extremely performative, self-conscious, and exaggerated cross-dressing in the world of drag seems to find it *more* difficult to see questions of gender explored in such a de-centered and sub-surface way.

So even as Negga enters into a long tradition of women as Hamlet and does so in a way that aligns with nineteenth-century breeches roles norms (her gender is not highlighted in the performance and her modern-costuming is fairly standard for today’s theater), the shifting context around commentary on gender undergirds an unsettled critical response. At its peak in popularity, “tragic crossdressing on the nineteenth-century stage offered potentially unsettling perspectives on the dominant nineteenth-century belief in essential intellectual and emotional differences between men and women” (Russell 151). In the twenty-first century, western society confronts new questions about gender: transgender men and women are more visible than ever, a growing number of people identify outside of the normative gender binary, and breaking conventions of gendered clothing is increasingly embraced. When a woman takes a male role and does so without explicitly acknowledging the choice on stage, the “potentially unsettling perspective” becomes far less about “essential intellectual and emotional difference between men and women” and far more about interrogating the performativity, ambiguity, and even necessity of gender (Russell 151). These questions disturb reviewers, even as they seemingly work to meet them comfortably and without conflict. Writing for *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley, for instance, cannot quite decide whether or not he thinks Negga’s gender “matters”: “I started to write that the fact that this man is played by a woman is irrelevant. But there is one sense in which the basic disparity between this actress and this role feeds the quickening sensibility that infused every aspect of Farber’s interpretation” (Brantley). While he declines to explain *how* Negga’s gender influences this dynamic, the fact that Brantley must walk through this logical process of first denying its importance altogether before being able to acknowledge its impact on the production suggests the mental gymnastics that other reviewers also attempt, in less explicit ways, to talk about gender without making it too much of *a thing* in their review, without seeming like they care *too* much about gender at all.

Perhaps, though, part of reviewers’ bumbling when it comes to Negga’s Hamlet can be explained by Hamlet’s ambiguous gender status. Farber even addresses this ambiguity, although not necessarily in a way that clears it up. Farber intentionally cast Negga because she is more “believable” as Hamlet in the context of 2020, gesturing to the character’s frustration with reality when he says that “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.195-96) in today’s tense cultural moment: “The times we are living in are so confounding, it leaves one with a sense of outrage, of feeling constantly gaslit… I really wanted to hear from somebody who I could believe, in a very real way, had access to experiences about living through something like that” (qtd. in Ito). From this perspective, casting a Black woman was an important choice that Farber made in order to appropriately express Hamlet’s emotional experience. And yet, Hamlet is not actually re-gendered in this production. Farber goes on to explain her hang-up with how to gender Hamlet: “We kept stumbling over the pronouns. I said to Ruth, ‘I don’t think we’re changing this into ‘Hamlette,’ or stepping into the gender neutral of it.’ It wasn’t a negating of her femininity or a bolstering of a masculinity. It was simply Hamlet” (Ito). So it is important to the emotional logic of this production that Hamlet is a Black woman, but the character Hamlet is neither a woman nor gender neutral, but he must be a man in a way that does not negate Negga’s femininity. In a sense, then, the fact that reviewers struggle with Hamlet’s gender should not come as a surprise; Farber and Negga ask their audiences to make a complex move in understanding the way gender presents in this production.

And yet, this complexity and ambiguity, which even Farber struggles to coherently explain, addresses the foregrounding of the gender spectrum in current social discourse. Celebrities like Harry Styles, Billy Porter, and Lil Nas X, men who often wear traditionally feminine clothing, are simultaneously praised as gender-role-crushing icons and reviled as symbolizing the downfall of manhood; transgender people are far more visible and accepted than they have ever been in western society and yet find themselves battling for their rights to participate in sports, access gender-affirming healthcare, and even use the restroom that aligns with their gender; the singular “they” is increasingly recognized and accepted both for gender nonbinary people and for people of indeterminate gender, all while some cisgender people insist that they “don’t use pronouns” (which, amongst other things, suggests some uncertainty with English grammar rules). If Farber intended audiences to take Negga in social context, the liminality of Hamlet’s gender can speak to a cultural reckoning with the construction of gender. In their turn, reviewers that stumble over Negga’s gender speak just as strongly to the way that we are socially coping–or not coping, as the case may be–with such a reckoning.

In a sense, contemporary discourse around gender is far more fraught than it was in the nineteenth century. The gender binary, rather than working as a convenient justification for sharp divides in gender roles, can no longer serve as a rhetorical safe haven. Today, understanding shifting gender norms means getting acquainted with gray areas and ambiguities, gray areas that cisgender men and women have rarely had to even think about on a historical scale. Just as the language used by nineteenth-century reviewers suggests greater social anxieties about social constructs of masculinity, the gender panic that appears in reviews of Negga’s Hamlet in turn gestures to a broader inability to cope with gray areas in contemporary discourse. Even as this Hamlet defies easy and immediate categorization, reviewers are *desperate* to categorize him, to remind their readers of Negga’s gender, to maintain their grasp on two binary genders that, on the stage of St. Anne’s Warehouse, intersect, blend, cross each other’s boundaries, disappear and reappear, all in the subtext. Reviewers’ need to classify and to combat ambiguity even violates Hamlet’s own sense of self. Hamlet the character deeply values his own interiority as something not constructed or acted out, but true to the point of being beyond easy perception and classification. When Gertrude asks Hamlet why his father’s death “seems… so particular with thee” (1.2.75), Hamlet angrily responds that he “know[s] not ‘seems’… For they are actions that a man might play: / But I have within which passeth show” (1.2.76, 84-85). But when Hamlet’s gender is deconstructed on stage and the structures of masculinity that still define his character in an age past the employment of padded stockings are disrupted, no longer something “that a man might play,” reviews crash head-long into their own expectations for the performance of gender on stage.

In 2019, Glenda Jackson played King Lear on Broadway. Similar to Negga’s Hamlet, Jackson played Lear as a man, never acknowledging her own gender on stage. Her performance is inventive, dominant: “Jackson is the smallest person on stage, but you won’t notice it – she arrives cascading over the language, dominating it. In this way Jackson gives us the only truly contemporary interpretation of Lear I’ve ever seen, a king whose command relies not on brute might but in the ability to manipulate words” (Sehgal). Jackson’s performance, according Parul Sehgal, is bolstered by the kingly force of her own nature, as well as “her campaign against imprecision” (Sehgal). Sehgal quotes Jackson’s description of Shakespeare from their interview as “the most contemporary writer there is… He only ever really asks three questions: Who are we? Why are we? What are we? And no has ever come up with a comprehensive answer to any of those questions” (qtd. in Sehgal). Hamlet and King Lear are perhaps the Shakespearean tragic leads that ask such questions the most stubbornly and consistently; how much more stubbornly do they ask them when the basic assumptions of their genders are discarded in favor of ambiguity? How much less successfully do reviewers “come up with a comprehensive answer” (Sehgal) when they cannot drop their death grip on the disparity between the actor’s gender and the character’s gender? Despite the changes in overarching review culture from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, reviewers’ language around cross-dressed women nevertheless demonstrates a long tradition of Shakespeare’s tragic men serving as a crucial ground for offering both anxiety relief and a radically, “potentially unsettling perspective” (Russell 151) for contemporary questions about gender.

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