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978-0-521-11721-0 - Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction

Tony Howard

Frontmatter

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## WOMEN AS HAMLET

The first Hamlet on film was Sarah Bernhardt. Probably the first Hamlet on radio was Eve Donne. Ever since the late eighteenth century, leading actresses have demanded the right to play the role – Western drama's greatest symbol of active consciousness and conscience. Their iconoclasm, and Hamlet's alleged 'femininity', have fascinated playwrights, painters, novelists and film-makers from Eugène Delacroix and the Victorian novelist Mary Braddon to Angela Carter and Robert Lepage. Crossing national and media boundaries, this book addresses the history and the shifting iconic status of the female Hamlet in writing and performance. Many of the performers were also involved in radical politics: from Stalinist Russia to Poland under martial law, actresses made Hamlet a symbol of transformation or crisis in the body politic. On stage and film, women reinvented Hamlet from Weimar Germany to the end of the Cold War. This book aims to put their half-forgotten achievements centre-stage.

TONY HOWARD lectures in English at the University of Warwick. In 2000 he was the International Shakespeare Fellow at Shakespeare's Globe. He has worked in the professional theatre in several capacities, with plays performed by Covent Garden Community Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East / Royal Court Theatre and Major Road. He is the author of *A Short Sharp Shock* (with Howard Brenton, 1980) and, with John Stokes, is the co-editor of *Acts of War: The Representation of Military Conflict on the British Stage and Television Since 1945* (1996). Performed translations, with Barbara Bogoczek, include works by Mikhail Bulgakov, Tadeusz Różewicz and Jan Brzechwa. His essays on Shakespeare, film and theatre have appeared in many books and journals including *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Around the Globe*.

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## *Preface*

This book has its origins in 1990 when thanks to the Artistic Director of Kraków's Stary Theatre I was fortunate enough to see Teresa Budzisz-Kryżanowska in *Hamlet (IV)*, directed by Andrzej Wajda. A decade earlier, I had seen Frances de la Tour's Hamlet at the Half Moon Theatre in London while working with her director Robert Walker and her Gertrude, Maggie Steed, on an anti-Thatcher satire in which, reversing *Hamlet*, all but two of the cast were women and most cross-dressed as men. I admired Frances de la Tour's scorching, sad performance, but it was not until Kraków that I appreciated the extraordinary creative daring such a performance could involve, nor the new levels of meaning an actress playing Hamlet might open up. This led me to seek out Asta Nielsen's silent film *Hamlet* (1920) at the National Film and Television Archive in London, and to examine reviews of Sarah Bernhardt's 1899 production. It became clear that not only had a great many actresses played this role over the centuries, sometimes brilliantly, but that the idea of the female Hamlet had fascinated painters, novelists, playwrights and film-makers too – both women and men, and in many countries. Here was a Shakespearean subculture, inseparable from shifting attitudes to gender and political identity.

For a while this project aimed to be encyclopaedic, but so many professional actresses have played Hamlet that this proved impossible. What I have tried to do is to sketch the territory, and retrieve the stories of just a few remarkable performances. The extraordinary thing was not that so many great actresses had played Hamlet but that most were comprehensively forgotten. Treva Rose Tumbleson's unpublished 1981 PhD thesis was an indispensable guide (sadly she died while this book was taking shape); fortunately several of those careers have lately received acute scholarly attention, and more will follow.

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This is a study of a tradition that has run alongside the ‘official’ fortunes of *Hamlet* for over two centuries. After the Introduction, the first two chapters explore the emergence of that tradition from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, and the growing connections between the female Hamlet and the politics of enfranchisement. This leads to a study of Bernhardt’s legendary transitional *Hamlet* and some aspects of her international legacy. Chapters 5 to 8 focus on key productions/performances – from World War I to the end of the Cold War – in Germany, the USSR, Poland, Spain, Turkey and Eire; these sections consider some of the ways Hamlet’s body has been reshaped by changing attitudes to gender, repression and political control. Chapter 9 looks at female Hamlets in sound film and fiction, permeating our imagination in contradictory ways. Chapter 10 samples the explosion of Shakespearean cross-gender experiments in Britain and the USA since the late 1970s. The concluding chapter considers the complex iconic status of the female Hamlet in recent writing and performance. The early chapters focus on the work of individual actresses, and on the creative feminisation of Hamlet by the painter Eugène Delacroix and the novelist Mary Braddon. The later sections explore the relationship between artists, cultural movements and power in specific national situations; the female Hamlet has been an elusive signifier of both schism and possibility.

Most of the modern (1979 and after) stage productions discussed in detail in this book, I saw either in person or on tape; the one exception was *Hamlet’s Nightmare* at the Project Theatre, Dublin, so I am especially grateful to the production staff who obtained information for me. There is no space to acknowledge all those to whom I am indebted but I must thank Teresa Budzisz-Kryzanowska, Frances de la Tour, Olwen Fouere, Fiona Shaw, Tadeusz Bradecki of the Sary Theatre, and very many at Shakespeare’s Globe – especially Patrick Spottiswoode who arranged a special screening of Asta Nielsen’s *Hamlet* at the National Film Theatre, and Claire van Kampen who composed a new live score for it. I have been generously helped by the staff of the Theatre Museum, the British Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Museo Nacional del Teatro, the National Film and Television Archive, New York Public Library, the Shakespeare Centre, Birmingham Shakespeare Library, and the University of Warwick Library. My debt to those who helped with access to and translation of archive materials, films and videos is immense, including Ania Barwinska, Rowland Cotterill, Maria Delgado, José Ramón Díaz Fernandez, Dilek Inan, Russell Jackson, Lasse Kekki, Jennifer Lorch, Kirsten Ludwig, Luke McTiernan, Lawrence Raw, Monika Siedel,



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All of that however pales beside the contribution and patience of Barbara Bogoczek, without whom it would never have been finished, or begun.