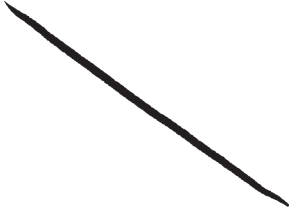


A STAGE PROPOSAL
FOR HAMLET'S POLITICISED
BODY:
**REQUIEM FOR A WOMAN
BORN TO BE KING**

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Abstract: This article is addressed to stage performers and directors, offering alternative ways of thinking and interpreting a role while using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a pretext - both the play and the lead. In my gendeconstructed and genreconstructed vision, the main character's female physical body is forcefully substituted by the politicised body (male, royal, learned) imposed by societal expectations. Its practical utopian aim is to offer female actors new roles and possibilities, new visions of dusty classical roles. My "personal and political" standpoint is to advocate for more female roles and, implicitly, more jobs for women in theatres. Most classic plays predominantly feature male roles, which are forever reiterated onstage. However, in the following article's view, the male characters can be challenged and transformed into female characters, the character's *gender*; going beyond the character's exterior looks – which would easily be obtained using travesty. The following analysis proves that changing the gender of a character will generate a vital change for the whole play. It will function as a de-peripheralized stage catalyst, forcing the sexist heteronormative classical plays to actually work for women, for female actors. This transformation will also give the play a Camp aesthetic, challenging and ultimately changing the conventional *genre* of the play.

Keywords: Body politics, gender studies, queer theory, *Re-Con-Queering Shakespeare*, gendeconstruction, genreconstruction.

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Actors are the original poststructuralists, assuming, throughout the history of theatre, that the author does not control the play, the interpreter does; and that, indeed, there is, for the purposes of performance – which are, after all, the purposes of drama – no author, only an infinitely mutable script.

Stephen Orgel, *Authentic Shakespeare*

The Character's Politicised Body

Inscribed in the Body Politics theme, the following piece is a stage proposal, an invitation, a fresh appetizer offered for future stage practices, revealing the way in which the processes of *gendeconstruction*¹ and *genreconstruction*² work in practice.

1 My term; it refers to the deconstruction of gender within the discourse that deconstruction operates on. Gendeconstruction is related to Queer Theory and desire. See Nedelea, P. (2012) *Femina Ludens: Re-Con-Queering Shakespeare*. Pittsburg: RoseDog Books, Dorrance Publishing, p. ix.

2 My term; it refers to the reconstruction of the genre of the discourse that deconstruction operates on. When applied to a play, *gendeconstruction* tends to determine also a process of *genreconstruction* from a serious/tragic genre into a comic one. While *gendeconstruction* is related to Queer Theory, *genreconstruction* is linked to Camp Theory. But its meaning is more restricted than Camp, for it refers to a transformation of one literary genre into another (Nedelea, 2012, p. x).

Addressed to stage performers and directors, this article proposes alternative ways of thinking and interpreting a role while using the “most classical role” of “the most classical” playwright ever, that is, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as an example. In such gendeconstructed and genreconstructed vision, the character’s physical body (female, native) is forcefully substituted by the politicised body (male, royal, learned) imposed by social demands.

The practical aim of my proposal is to offer actresses new roles and possibilities, new visions of dusty classical roles. My standpoint, as an actor and as a feminist (because „*personal is political*”), is to advocate for more roles for women and, implicitly, more theatre jobs for women. But how could we get there, as male roles are predominant in classic plays, which are forever reiterated onstage? In my view, the male characters can be transformed into female characters³, meaning the character’s *gender*; not just the character’s exterior looks, which would be easily obtained using travesty. Changing the gender of a character will become, as we shall see, a major change for the whole play. It will function as a de-peripheralized stage catalyst, forcing patriarchal classical plays (which were, are, and will be endlessly performed on stage) to actually work for women. At the same time, it will implicitly change the *genre* of the play.

Performance Studies scholars have shown that Shakespeare’s text is just *one* of the many factors that give meaning to a performance:⁴ The directors and performers are not just the Bard’s interpreters, they are also *makers* of meanings. There are clear signs that a feminist Ophelia is doable (Barber, F., 1988, p. 138), and so is a powerful Isabella,⁵ and two women can interpret (using travesty) the roles of the two gentlemen of Verona;⁶ ‘we find only what we are looking for or are willing to see’ (Orgel, S., 2002, p. 186). I suggest we can go way deeper than that.

When an actor is preparing for a role, a common method to start tackling it is to imagine the character’s biography. By starting to study a dramatic character, the actor (in our case, the actress) tries to imagine the character’s biography in as much detail as possible. In the following paragraphs, I shall offer some examples of *Femina Ludens* characters’ biographies in order to show the way those possible biographies might work on stage; in the process, these biographies might actually

3 This change would also work the other way around, transforming female roles into male roles; the result would still be a Camp-ish change, but it would not serve my declared political purpose.

4 Bulman, J.C. (1996, pp 1-11); Worthen, W.B. (1997); Hodgdon, B. (1998). For an opposite (and older) opinion (showing Shakespeare’s texts as stable and authoritative) see J. L. Styan, J.L. (1977).

5 Stevenson (who has played Isabella’s part) interviewed by Rutter, C. (1989, pp 45 and 48-49). On the same performance see Penny Gay, P. (1994, pp 138-139).

6 The University of Pennsylvania’s Theatre Arts production *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1999), directed by Cary Mazer, is quoted in Werner, S. (2001, 96-98).

transform the whole network of sexual relations between the characters of the play, as well as the genre of the play: from a tragedy or a problem play into a Camp⁷ comedy.

The following stage proposal will address *Hamlet*, the most iconic dramatic production of the Bard and the greatest pop-iconic tragic male character. It is well-known that the role of Hamlet has been played by many great actresses in drag – Charlotte Charke, Sarah Siddons (in the XVIIth century), numerous actresses during the XVIIIth century, and the famous Sarah Bernhard (onscreen) (Howard, 2007). What I bring forward is a variant in which Hamlet is not only *played by* a woman, but *is* a woman. Let us see how the characters' motivations and relations might change in this particular case; subsequently, we will witness the way in which, through the process of *gendeconstruction*, the play ceases to be a tragedy (ait actually goes through a *genreconstruction* process).

Let us imagine that the character of Hamlet is a woman, and that all her fluctuations and doubts are the result of her incapacity to decide whether she should “come out” as a woman or not, due to all the implications of such a gesture, especially the political ones. This Hamlet variant – whom I will refer to as “h.” – not only did not love her father, but she hated him fiercely. The seriousness of the play fails in moments such as those when her intentions are misinterpreted as sexual by Ophelia, while Horatio, on the contrary, interprets her affection as just friendship. Other Camp and *genreconstructive* moments might be the ones when the patriarchal ghost appears and demands revenge for his death or the final duel, a masquerade that ends with h. killing Claudius by accident.

The Princess h.'s Politicised Body

Let the alternative imaginary biography story begin. Hamlet, the king of Denmark, has a fair one-to-one fight with Fortinbras, the king of Norway, who claims Hamlet's throne. Gertrude, Hamlet's queen, who has finally managed to become pregnant, insists on witnessing the fight (the whole court is present, foreign observers as well). But she will not remain seated in her high-ranking seat to see the end of the fight; before the start of the second round, she was already delivering the baby. The moment Hamlet is almost defeated, he hears his newborn screaming and proudly utters the words “This is my son's country” while stabbing Fortinbras to death. Exhausted but filled with joy, King Hamlet breaks into his wife's chamber in order to kiss his newborn son. “Where is my little

7 See Sontag, S. (1964) *Notes on Camp*. in *Camp – Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (1999) Ed. Fabio Cleto. US: The University of Michigan Press, UK: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 53-66.

Hamlet?” he asks. Gertrude does not answer. Not because she is dead; worse than that, because the little baby is a girl.

The court is waiting to see the baby boy, the future ruler who has brought them peace with his very birth. The king should tell them the truth, but his pride makes him take the baby, cover her with a cloth, and show her to his people. “Hooray!!!” This avoidance of an embarrassing moment will later be paid for with a life of lies. Time passes, and the king still awaits a “real” boy, his true inheritor. He dreams about this boy every day. “Then, after my baby is born, h. will just disappear from the court. We’ll put her in a nice convent.” This is how the unhappy father would delude himself. Years pass by, Gertrude would never get pregnant again. The king would make love to her three or four times a day; collective prayers are held on a regular basis; doctors, witches, and alchemists are paid to make a miracle happen. But they have all ran out of miracles ever since h.’s birth. The baby’s first scream (according to the legend, it was the word “daaady!”), which saved her father’s life while allowing him to win the battle, was the last miracle that happened at the court.

h. is a prodigy child. By the age of three, she is already able to write. At four, she already speaks Latin and even some Greek. At the age of five, her parents explain to her that she is the first woman-actor and that the world is a stage on which she has to play the role of a boy. This is the big secret that will forever unite the only three who know about it. This family becomes a royal trinity (we can assume what happened to the royal doctor or to the servants that assisted her birth). The father promises the little girl that, provided she keeps the secret, he will love her as much as he would have loved his son. When she is seven, h. starts to read Plato. Soon, it will become clear to her that all the books were written by men. But were they really men, she wonders, or perhaps they were “men” like her?

h. is being raised as a prince: her education encompasses both mind and body. She excels in sports and arts made by men for men. She is not allowed to play with other children, except for two boys, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the sons of noblemen; these two boys used to undress and play a secret funny game, but when they invite h., she turns them down, because then they would find out that she is not like them. She finds them boring anyway; her only friends (if one can call the people one laughs with “friends”) are some actors who used to stop by the court to play their plays and tragedies. Most importantly, she befriends Yorick, the old jester, a man wiser than Plato, who reveals to her the most important things, such as that man and woman are all the same after they die.

It is a bit complicated to state whether h. loves her mother or not. They used to spend plenty of time together, breathing the same air. However, the two women do not talk much. h. would read her philosophy books, while Gertrude

would do women's stuff: she likes to embroider covers for h.'s books. These covers usually depict visual versions of the historical battle scene between Hamlet and Fortinbras and the miraculous moment h. was born.

The moment h. tells her parents about her wish to go to university in order to study philosophy, all of a sudden, they remember that she is actually a girl. "The university is not for women," says the king. "Why not?" Gertrude asks. "I'm not a woman, father," says h. After h.'s departure, the queen feels lonely and unhappy. She is in her forties, but that is not the reason. The king will not have sex with her anymore; his hope to have a boy someday has faded away. This is the moment when Claudius, the king's brother, stops by. Suddenly, she finds a reason to live: there is a guest at the court, and he must be treated right.

At Wittenberg University, h. finds a trustful friend, a clever guy, and a fair man, all in one person: Horatio. She thinks she could love and marry him if he ever loved her as a woman. Many people suspect h. is gay because of her lack of interest in women. Still, some courtesans would spread the word that they spent the night with him/her and that he/she was spectacular in bed. Some men would also claim the same. Soon she receives the news about her father's death, and that is when h. decides to start living a real life. She will attend the funeral and she will tell the truth about her gender identity. Her father is dead, and the promise about keeping the secret accompanies him to his tomb. Before she leaves Wittenberg, h. will tell Horatio the shocking truth about herself.

Now that her father is dead, for the first time in her life, h. has the possibility of choosing between "coming out" as a woman or "staying" as a man; she now has the gender choice. To be a man would mean keeping on lying (in order to please a dead father) and eventually becoming the king of Denmark. To be a woman would mean she could marry Horatio and have children with him (at least one boy!). To assume her future life role of being a woman would mean she would have to study girlish behaviour; therefore, h. starts flirting with Ophelia, the pretty but not necessarily smart daughter of Polonius. On the other hand, to be a man would mean she would be able to read and learn whatever she pleased, to have the freedom to stay or go, while being a woman would mean embroidery and getting bored, trying hard to get noticed by a man and lure him into marrying her.

They say men are clever, they fight fairly and write books in which they are searching for the truth (without ever finding it, but that is another story), while women are led by their sexual instinct and by men, and they will stop at nothing to satisfy their lust (for instance to legally re-marry right at the beginning of the mourning period, as Gertrude did). h. worries that, the moment she reveals her real gender, all the defects of womankind would suddenly be attached to her name. To

be neither man nor woman then seemed to be the best choice. Everyone blames h.'s sorrow on the death of the father and the marriage of the merry widow. All the talking about human nature and the common-versus-particular issue is very close to h.'s thoughts, but in a different way from what the others could even assume. Her mother's question: "If it be [common]/Why seems it so particular with thee?" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.277-8) gets on h.'s nerves. The queen is so taken with her new life that she does not even try to understand her daughter's thoughts. This is why h. so brutally answers her: "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'," (*Hamlet*, 1.2.279) meaning: "Yes, not only do I seem uncommon, but I am uncommon; I am a case, a particular uncommon in-between character, and you know it."

h. would look at her mother and realise that apparently the queen could not care less about her dead, loving husband. "This is how women are," she would then think, and "I definitely do not want to be one of them": "Frailty, thy name is woman." (*Hamlet*, 1.2.350) Of course, at the same time, she cannot help but think of her own "frailty" as well: the present one (determining the lack of decisiveness in her acts) and the future, unimaginable one, that comes after becoming a woman (like Gertrude or Ophelia). Horrified by this vision, h. decides not to choose the way of a woman. And this is the exact moment when Horatio and two other men enter the scene. This is when h.'s decision vanishes into thin air: Horatio came here for her. However immediately after, h. meets the ghost of her father, who asks his "son" for revenge. Even the *ghost* of her father does not treat her as the daughter she really is. Since Orestes refused to be born, Electra has to do everything in his place.

The Body, the Soul, the Spirit, and the Corpse

h. appears to be avoiding physical contact with other people; she cannot stand men's touch even when they want to protect her; even when in contact with Ophelia, as we know, she barely touches her wrist. She touches books instead of people, and she will die by the poisoned "touch" of a sword without any bodily contact with her killer. h. rejects human touch; she rejects the flesh (including her own). The flesh, that is, women's flesh, her mother's flesh, is to blame for everything. While hating flesh, h. is fascinated by bones. While death is ungendered, life is always gendered.

h.'s indecision is directly related to her body; it refuses to be a man's body; she calls it "this body" (*Hamlet*, 1.4.718) instead of "my body" (*Hamlet*, 2.1.1035-41). This objectification of the body also implies that she hasn't decided what to do with it just yet: whether to accept it, along with its sexualities, or to deny it and keep on hiding it. She is not afraid of what lies outside (ghosts, for instance), but

of what lies inside, her corporeality. The same dichotomy, appearance–identity, is present in the ghost’s speech. Her father’s ghost talks about the father as if they were different identities. The ghost only bears the dead king’s appearance, it is *not* the dead king himself. Taking this into consideration, it is safe to assert that there are not only two but four participants in the scene of the dialogue on the platform: a body (in conflict with the soul), a soul (tortured by its corporeality), a spirit (which seems to be misinformed about the true story of h. and treats her as a man), and a corpse (the ex-tyrant who becomes the victim). The spirit laments, revealing the dead father’s demand to be avenged. The soul gets the message. However, the body does not get the chance to speak for itself.

h. suffers a double shock during this encounter: She finds out that Claudius killed his brother (so, as it turns out, it is men who are the meanest ones); she also finds out that the ghost asks *her* to kill Claudius. The tyrant’s wish is to make her behave like a man again and fulfil a male duty. If, up until that moment, she had doubts whether she wanted to be a woman or a man, from then on the gender choice would be transformed into a dilemma about duty and responsibility. If h. were to behave in a “mannish” manner, she would avenge her father’s murder and become the king of Denmark; this means that she would assume this male role for the rest of her life. If h. were to behave in a “womanish” manner, she would sit aside, waiting for heavenly justice to take care of everything, and she would do that for the rest of her life.

h.’s first impulse is to rise against this tremendous obligation imposed by a dead but still present father. She desperately tries to reveal herself as a woman and hence, get rid of the new burden. She runs to Ophelia’s room, determined to come out and expose her female body to the other young woman. She runs to Ophelia:

with his doublet all unbraced;
No hat upon his head; his stockings foul’d,
Ungarter’d, and down-gyved to his ancle;
Pale as a shirt; his knees knocking each other;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosened out of hell,
To speak of horrors (*Hamlet*, 2.1.1035-41)

to find support in this girl who gets interrupted from her sewing. But Ophelia is not able to understand h.’s painful dilemma. h. will then repeat the same scene, motivated by the same hope of being understood by another woman; she runs to her mother’s bedroom, starting a discussion about the “inmost” part of her, her female hidden part, her female body evidence, which is a reflection of Gertrude,

the woman, the queen: "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you." (*Hamlet*, 3.4.2405-6) Gertrude, terrified that Polonius, hidden behind the curtains, will hear her royal secret, screams for help. Polonius rushes to her help; through his incidental death, he actually helps the queen get rid of the unpleasant, unwanted conversation. h. will end up behaving in a manly manner by accident; she will kill a man with her sword. Faith has decided for her.

Claudius has no idea about h.'s real gender. If he had known the truth, he would be relieved: a girl is less dangerous than a man. In her disappointment, h. oscillates between the only two possible genders of her time: she is disappointed by both woman and man, and when she says that "*man delights not me; no, nor woman/neither*," (*Hamlet*, 2.1.1402-3) she actually means it. h.'s pain is her lack of models on both sides. The two female models, the dumb, daddy's girl Ophelia and the nymphomaniac queen, seem as terrifying as any other patriarchal model -the tyrannical father who had transformed her into a boy, his brother and killer, or the stupid spies. Perhaps Horatio really is a valuable model (at least she sees him that way), but in this case another poignant problem lies beneath: h. may want to be *with* him, but certainly does not want to be *like* him. In the end, being human does not seem to be a good choice in *any* of these cases.

The responsible figure for all h.'s dilemmas is the patriarch himself, who has rejected her as a daughter from the very beginning but does not hesitate to come back after his death and ask her to avenge him; he is Jephtah, the judge that did not love his "*fair daughter*" (quite a transparent allusion, in *Hamlet*, 2.2.1482-6). Then, with the arrival of the actors, another possible solution also comes forward. h. knows theatre, she has practised it since birth. The actors are transvestites, like her. Suddenly, h. finds herself hoping she has found a non-violent solution because she blindly believes in the powers of theatre. If Claudius gets to see his crime on stage, he will fall into this trap and instantly confess everything. Then, he will be punished, and everyone can go home in peace. This optimistic-pacifistic vision certainly gives a clear hint at h.'s gender.

Of course, things happen in a different way. Before her death, h. asks Horatio to spread her painful yet true story because Horatio is the only trustworthy witness to her life and death. And so he does, and he will make her story immortal. He will not forget to say that the prince was not guilty of the crimes. He will not hide any of "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts;/Of accidental judgements, casual slanders;/Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause." (*Hamlet*, 5.2.4049-50). Horatio will tell it all, carefully restoring his sweet prince's voice. He will patiently dictate the entire story to one of the actors so that they can later stage it. There is only one small gender detail that was left out.

Conclusion

The method proposed by me and exemplified by working on Hamlet (the character *and* the play) offers a chance to reinvent and revive the classics (*all* the classic dramatists, not just the old Bard, mentioned here as an example). All the lines of the play are here to stay, while the meaning is twisted in a new, coherent and interesting way. The process of reinventing the characters' gender offers infinite ludic alternatives to the old plays and, as a follow up, it reconquers, even recon-queers the stage by transforming the play's genre.

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