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Book Review: 'Shakespeare and Gender in Practice' by Terri Power

Kate Busselle
University of Missouri

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Power, Terri. *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 192 pp. \$25.21 (paperback).

Shakespeare and Gender in Practice, the third volume in the *Shakespeare {in} Practice* series, is a theoretical and practical exploration of gender performance through Shakespeare's works on stage. Written by Terri Power, founder of the MA in Performing Shakespeare at Bath Spa University in the United Kingdom along with the co-founder of Stance Theatre Company, this volume implements intersectional feminist and queer theories, historical documentation, interviews, and workshop exercises to demonstrate the depth of Shakespearean gender performance. Power's goal for this volume is to offer new ideas of gender performance using an intersectional feminist framework while simultaneously deconstructing preconceived notions of traditional Shakespearean performance. Power also sheds new light on possibilities of casting Shakespearean work and provides inspiration for feminist scholars, directors, students, and working actors who wish to explore gender in practice.

Power's text is broken up into three parts with eleven chapters within these parts. "Part I: In Theory" examines the intersections of gender and feminist theory with Shakespeare, audience-actor dynamics in performance, queering Shakespearean performance, and case studies examining how feminist practice and Shakespeare can interact. "Part II: In Practice" investigates the approaches of companies that practice differing forms of gender identity and Shakespearean performance; specifically, she examines "traditional" all-male companies, all-female companies, queer Shakespearean companies, and cross-gender Shakespeare workshops. "Part III: Debate and Provocation," includes an interview with Power and Lisa Wolpe, Founding Producing Artistic Director of Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company. Rather than attempt to examine all of the chapters in detail, I will highlight a few exceptional chapters from each section.

In the introduction, Power admits the difficulty in finding artifacts of Elizabethan private court productions, in which amateur women did perform, contrary to popular belief. She defines cross-gender performance, trans-dressed performance, and performative language like "acts" and "portrayal," and concludes with why she is merging feminist theory with Shakespeare. This introduction provides a solid framework and context for the

rest of the book's chapters while navigating various feminist and queer theories in reference to Shakespearean performance.

The chapter "Opportunity in Performing Shakespeare is a Drag for Women," addresses the gender gap within the entertainment industry as well as gender bias in critiques of "alternative" forms of Shakespearean performance. Looking at the reviews of Mark Rylance's performance as Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Fiona Shaw as Richard II, Power points out the gendered bias that may be unconscious for the reviewers; Rylance is praised for stepping outside of his gender identity for performance, whereas Shaw is harshly criticized as "a Drag" and that she lacks enough maleness to successfully play the role. Power also cites several studies that highlight lack of women in entertainment, as well as possible solutions to the gender gap, including implementing motion capture and encouraging acting unions to monitor female employment in higher-ranked positions and onstage. With the advent of #metoo and #timesup, this chapter provides exceptional relevance that resonates with today's issues in employment and power in the entertainment industry, specifically related to Shakespeare.

"Part II: In Practice" examines many faces of gender performance and Shakespeare. In "All-Male Companies," Power discusses three companies in the United Kingdom that practice all-male casting: Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (SGT), Propeller, and Lord Chamberlain's Men (LCM). Both SGT and LCM cite "historical accuracy" as the primary justification for all-male casting. Propeller remains unique as they merge Brechtian *mise-en-scène* with Shakespeare to portray characters using only suggestive costume pieces. The audience never forgets the performers' gender expressions, but bend their minds to "seeing" cross-gendered performance because of this framework. This chapter might offer directors of Shakespeare guidance on casting in a more equitable and fluid manner

"The Female Characters and All-Female Companies" explores notable performances of female casting and all-female companies, which mostly reside in the United States. Power notes vocal training as an important element of a successful feminine-to-masculine cross-gendered performance as the audience "hears" the play as much as "sees" the play. She also suggests these companies have a steeper hill to climb regarding "legitimacy" because they lack historical claim of all-male companies, despite a long history doing the same work.

“Creative Casting” focuses on artistic casting within gender-blended companies. There are two dominant approaches: “selective casting (casting an actor against the gender of their character) and regendering (when a character is changed in a story to a different gender to match the casting).”¹ Power explores both using Vanessa Redgrave’s turn as Prospero in selective casting and regendered casting at The Judith Shakespeare Company. This chapter also proves valuable to directors to think about the critical choices made when selecting a particular actor for a role and what messages can be sent through different processes of creative casting.

In “Queer Shakespeare,” Power argues Shakespearean text is queer given existing myths surrounding Shakespeare’s sexuality. In addition, queerness exists in cross-dressing roles of female characters to male characters, so Power suggests “we can re-read [Shakespeare’s] plays and stage them in non-traditional ways to highlight contemporary issues and experiences of queer ‘otherness.’”²

As a British, female, queer scholar, and educator, Terri Power unpacks complex theories and effectively demonstrates their implementation. *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice* would serve well in a graduate-level course as some theorists discussed require more examination than most undergraduate-level courses might allow. This book would best serve a directing, Shakespearean studies, or gender studies course as her work is intersectional as well as interdisciplinary. Not only does Power give the reader precedent for creative casting choices, but in *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice*, she gives tools and power to practice it.

¹ 101.

² 125.