

HOWARD, TONY. *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Reviewed by FRANCES M. RINGWOOD

Women as Hamlet (2009) is the paperback re-issue of Tony Howard's history of 'the woman Hamlet', which was first published in 2007. The work, begun in 1990, took a total of seventeen years to complete, and its publication date is contemporaneous with another important work relating to Hamlet studies and the body, Margareta de Grazia's 'Hamlet' without Hamlet (2007). It is divided into an introduction and three succeeding parts, including: a brief account of Angela Winkler's performance in Peter Zadek's Hamlet (1999); a history of performance up until Sarah Bernhardt's apotheosis; an analysis of the woman Hamlet on the avant-garde periphery of Europe; and a concluding discussion of her multiplication and refraction in popular culture. A combination of fictional re-conceptions of the female Hamlet, actresses' interpretations and myth – these accounts all interact and coalesce to finally enshrine the ephemeral qualities surrounding a transgendered approach to what Max Beerbohm conceived of as the great role.

At the outset, *Women as Hamlet* declares itself a history, but this is a history with a difference: not only does it explicate the woman Hamlet across the three separate media of theatre, film and fiction, it also comments on the lives and physical characteristics of those who have embodied this role. Foreshadowing these preoccupations, the opening quotation is Hélène Cixous' question, "How can woman put herself into the text – into the world and into history?" For Howard, the answer has been to write a history which traces the reinvention and development of the woman Hamlet in the same tone as a Grecian epic. Intersections between different media are dealt with in such a way as to bring out the rich intertextual borrowings that have taken place in the creation of what has become an archetypal 'woman in black'.

Howard's style can best be described as 'sensuous', especially in his description of nineteenth century actresses who took on the role, including Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman and Felicita von Vestavali. Each auteur is given her own space: a laconic vignette of her life and its relation to her interpretation of Hamlet. Solipsism is emphasised as a crucial aspect of the role, where "deliberately or unconsciously, all performers expose aspects of themselves in it ... Hamlet is the process of individuation" (58). Not surprisingly, there is a corresponding fascination with how

these actresses coped with the parallel between Hamlet's isolation and their own during a time when deviations from normative sexual and gendered practices were viewed with hostility. Personal and mutually sustaining relationships are focalised as a release from claustrophobic social strictures.

The triumph of the woman Hamlet as a hero of feminine consciousness reaches its first zenith in the lyricism with which Howard describes Sarah Bernhardt's 1899 stage-performance:

[I]t was Bernhardt in the graveyard that became iconic, and spectators and artists projected their own nuances on her. In one photograph she looks casually down at a skull, with a hand on her waist and a detached half-smile ... she handled it 'callously' – 'as lightly as a lap-dog', but in another she holds Yorick's skull close to her face, her fingers touching its teeth, and at 'Here hung those lips that I have kissed', one critic [from the *Sunday Times*] sensed something unprecedented, 'a woman apostrophising the skull of a dead lover'.

(107)

This excerpt forms part of a larger recreation of Bernhardt's role as the definitive *fin de siècle* Hamlet, reconstructed in its entirety using the numerous newspaper reviews of the performance that are still available. In speaking about Bernhardt's later film-performance, it is with some chagrin that Howard admits it has survived "if only in fragment" (138).

Howard's deification of the actress-as-Hamlet is accomplished definitively in his account of Asta Nielsen's iconoclastic performance in Svend Gade's German *Hamlet* (1920). This ebullient celebration of performance is excusable in its excess only when viewed in conjunction with the two photo-stills of Nielsen's incarnation of the role. The first of these plates is used as the cover illustration of *Women as Hamlet*: a striking image as it shows a character who is at once feminine, androgynous and deeply sceptical, traits that have become so bound up in the casting of Hamlets that it is easy to forget that Richard Burbage, for whom the role was originally written, was unlikely to have performed Hamlet in this way (his was likely to have been a more physical, active embodiment – see Ackroyd 374).

The image of Nielsen's Hamlet is far more provocative and visually expressive than any painting of Burbage, or any other male Hamlet for that matter, with the possible exception of Laurence Olivier. Nielsen meets the camera's gaze, with her eyelids level over her eyes and head turned, poised over her right shoulder. Her pupils are directed slightly to the lower-right-hand corner of the camera lens, suggesting a half-hidden sense of incredulity at the corruption of the world, as well as a cynical acceptance of the status quo, signified by a subtle tightening at the corner of her mouth. Her body is turned conspiratorially towards the spectator, emphasising a duality of personal confidence and the desire for privacy. The most captivating aspect of this image is a felicity of build and talent. Nielsen was physically slight, but her shoulders do not droop to conform to pre-Raphaelite notions of the androgynous woman's beauty. She is not willowy but erect, her elegantly straight back stands out as a feature of the she-Hamlet's personality, and there is a strange kinetic freedom of movement tied into the natural and unstrained manner of this posture which gestures towards the fluidity that is expected of Hamlet in the performance of her "antic disposition". Howard elucidates Nielsen's eerie hold over the viewer at length, finally putting it down to the "hypercultivated, unstable and sophisticated" (144) period over which Nielsen presided as the intellectual ideal.

From Germany, Howard moves further East to discover the secrets of the woman Hamlet behind the iron curtain. This part of the work emphasises a highly experimental approach to the role with a quickening of variations in plot, adaptation, appropriation and auteurial possession. It begins by highlighting the bloody murder of Soviet actress Zinaida Raikh and how this political act of subject denial parallels the life of a character Raikh played only eight years previously. The character is Yelena Goncharova, an actress playing a female Hamlet who dies for her patriotic beliefs but who is unsurprisingly not recognised by the state. Women who confronted the repressive measures against artists working in Stalinist Russia were as likely as their male counterparts to become the victims of political violence. There was an exceptionally ugly and unconscious backlash against Raikh and the relentless spirit of inquiry she embodied: her eyes

were mutilated, a perverse recreation of the scene in which a woman in the street screams at Goncharova, “Why are you looking at me like that? Scratch out her eyes!” (161) Nielsen gazes back, but the woman Hamlet of Russia in the 1930s is silenced and disfigured.

The intersection between Raikh’s performance and her life is followed by the more placid reconstruction of Polish actress Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska’s physically demanding interpretation, in which she invoked the parallels between the woman Hamlet and the life of the performer. Part homage to Raikh, part political challenge, Budzisz-Krzyżanowska’s *Hamlet (IV)*, which was staged in Kraków over a period of thirty years up until 1989 and directed by Andrzej Wajda, serves as the realisation of Michael Chekhov’s query:

What kind of evil is presented by King Claudius? ... What is the need of this play in our present time? ... Is it a play which will drug the audience, make it indifferent to the events of contemporary life with all its conflicts, or will it arouse in the audience a protest against negative powers?
(189)

Chekhov’s observation was as applicable in Shakespeare’s time as in Budzisz-Krzyżanowska’s, or indeed our own. Andrew Hadfield, in *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (2005) and *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (2004), argues that the play is inherently more political than psychological, saying:

In writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare turned to what might have seemed a relatively obscure source, but it was a tale with immense and obvious political charge in the late 1580s, in the immediate aftermath of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, and in the 1590s, with the death of Elizabeth ever more imminent, and the threat of the Essex faction culminating in the abortive rebellion of 1601.
(Hadfield 187)

In effect, Shakespeare was prevented from articulating an overt censure of the corruption and party politics of the Elizabethan court and so channelled his and his society’s collective frustration into Hamlet’s analysis of corruption in staged-Denmark (and his long suppressed action against it).

Howard’s analysis takes into account both of these approaches to staging *Hamlet*, cementing the idea of individual consciousness and how its formation is mediated by the state. This take on *Hamlet*, and how it is related to the “invention of the human” (to use Harold Bloom’s phrase), is also dealt with in *‘Hamlet’ without Hamlet* – de Grazia exposes the over-emphasis on interiority in Hamlet as being a historically mediated preoccupation which denies the importance of the interconnections between the state, individual psychology (a term coined by Coleridge) and the body. These connections had, however, already been described, if in a less in-depth manner, in E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942).

As a result, the power of Howard’s underlying premise – that women arrogate Hamlet’s role as an expression of selfhood – loses some of its force. It recalls the logic behind Wulf Sachs’s study *Black Hamlet* (1947), which ascribed to the notion of Hamlet as a metonym for individual consciousness to such an extent that Hamlet’s Oedipal complex was held up as proof that black people experienced consciousness in the same way as white people because they could be afflicted with the same neuroses. This focus on Hamlet’s isolation truncates the full meaning of the play, in that a society (and in this case a courtly and political society) has to be present and corrupt in order for Hamlet’s sense of alienation to carry with it any dramatically effective conflict.

Nevertheless, *Women as Hamlet* is an exciting work because of the detailed and scrupulous amount of research that has gone into its construction. The final chapters burst forth into two memorable retellings of cultural appropriations in Ireland and Turkey, ending in an analysis of the female Hamlet’s effect on popular culture. Metin Erksan’s Turkish film *Angel of Vengeance* or *Lady Hamlet (Intikan Malgi/Kadin Hamlet, 1976)* is provocatively described as a mixture of

political commentary, action thriller, musical and softcore sex comedy. Fatma Girik plays the lead role in this gender-reversed version, where Ophelia is transmuted into Orhan, a sad love-stricken youth who kills himself for want of his pants-wearing lady Hamlet. Kasim Bey (Claudius) tries to find Hamlet's secret and "stumbles into a piece of surreal theatre: in her third 'mad' scene Girik mocks her mother's sexuality. She plays a vamp in a tangerine nightgown ... smoking as she reads ('words, words') poems and listens to an old Turkish song, 'The Grave', on a psychedelically painted horn gramophone" (217). Howard also comments on the psychological significance of Hamlet's vengeance initially being directed against Gertrude.

Irish theatre is equally subversive, but with a more directed focus. Prefacing this section with the fact that the "postwar Abbey [Theatre] avoided Shakespeare till the 1970s and *Hamlet* until 1983" (224) is Howard's understated means of evoking the fraught relationship between England and Ireland. The most significant woman Hamlet after this period was Olwen Fouere in Michael Sheridan's aptly titled *Hamlet's Nightmare* (1993), in which the actress interprets the role in terms of the discourse of rape and colonialism. Fouere is quoted as saying "I felt that the legitimising of Claudius as Hamlet's mother's lover was experienced by Hamlet as kind of sexual violation against which he felt impotent." Ireland's woman Hamlet does not pull her punches.

Women as Hamlet ends with an inventory of the woman Hamlet's presence in contemporary fiction. This reels off into a multiplicity of different images and lives, but two striking examples are Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991) and one of Ian McEwan's characters, Mary, in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). In 1991 Harold Pinter adapted a screenplay of McEwan's novel, in which he corrodes and maligns the woman Hamlet in typical fashion. This notion is then quitted with an account of Carter's version:

World War II revue called What You Will (or What! You Will! or What? You Will?) in which the sisters Nora and Dora Chance become the first singing-and-dancing identical-twin female Hamlets on record: 'We were eighteen years old, hair like patent leather, legs up to our ears. We sported bellhop costumes for our Hamlet skit; should, we pondered in unison and song, the package be delivered to, I kid you not, "2b or not 2b."'

(90)

Howard applauds Carter's denial of the status of high culture.

While political and societal factors do feature in *Women as Hamlet*, these are treated as being secondary to women's subject-formation. That is not to say that the two are not represented as integrated, but there is definitely more emphasis placed on the realm of the personal than on the political. However, it is hard to fault Howard for this. His style of writing about the history and lives of the woman Hamlet and the actresses who have played this role is engaging and even seductive. His compilation of evidence is a labour of love and, all-in-all, this is a fine and worthwhile history, controlled in its scope but broad in its appeal. Its most prominent feature is its 'readability', for which, no doubt, it was a deserving winner of the Shakespeare's Globe 2007 book of the season.

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