Is She Not He Or He Not She?

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1 Mark Rylance, Artistic Director of the Globe Theatre, explains this year's Season of Regime Change as focusing on plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe which "explore power and change on three levels: in our states, in our marriages, and in our relationship to the divine." To these notions I would like to add gender relations, as the issues mentioned are highlighted in different productions precisely through an illuminating use of notions of femininity and masculinity. This seems to be most conspicuous in the Globe productions of Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III*, the first staged by the Globe's Men's Company, the latter presented by the Women's Company (introduced on the Globe's stage for the first time).

2 The production of *Richard II* (1595) explores the possible ways and patterns of staging the Shakespearean play in the original Globe. Thus, the spectators are given the opportunity to actually see how English Renaissance theatre could have worked during the playwright's life-time, including the meticulously recreated 16th century costumes and music that accompanies the actors on the stage. Naturally, such a production involves an all-male cast playing both female and male parts.

3 The play clearly deals with gender issues, focusing on notions of masculinity by probing into implications of power and heroism. Women are marginalized throughout the play. Moreover, all three female characters, Queen Isabel (Michael Brown), the Duchess of York (Peter Shorey), and the Duchess of Gloucester (William Osborne), seem to represent conventional roles of femininity, namely the loving wife, the protective mother, and the sorrowful widow. Queen Isabel's major scene is set in a garden (associated with notions of nature and nurture) where she whiles away her time grieving her husband, being excluded from the world of power and history. However, although her character has none of the transgressive power of other Shakespearean women, actor Michael Brown presents her without pretensions of feminine softness or fragility. On the contrary, he throughout retains a masculine posture and voice. Contrarily, Mark Rylance in the lead role interprets his Richard II as a mild character associated with feminine allure. The relationship between King and Queen thus seems to be marked by a significant gender crossing, questioning received notions of gender identity.

4 Mark Rylance's *Richard II* is presented far from being an embodiment of masculinity. Significantly, however, the emphasis of the production is not on Richard as a poor leader, but rather on Richard as a human being. Mark Rylance makes Richard's life-story heart-rending

for the audience. He appears far too mild and self-doubting to bear the heaviness of the crown. His private body seems to be at odds with the "body politic" divinely ascribed to him. In this sense, he is placed outside the world of male-defined power. This becomes most apparent when he is dethroned. Speaking with a gentle trembling voice, Richard II is clearly meant to be associated with the feminine, especially in contrast to female characters enacted in ways linked to notions of the masculine. Rylance presents Richard as incapable of facing and fighting the unwritten law of male-defined power exercised through physical violence and heartless rule, his words crumbling under the burden. It is not until the murder scene that he attempts in vain to defend himself by means of non-verbal physical struggle. We pity him after his death, realising that his death is due to his incapability to live up to the role of the powerful, severe male ruler.

5 In contrast, the all-female production of *Richard III* (1597) casts a different light on the link between gender and power issues. Here, English Renaissance convention is inverted, as we are presented with an all-female cast, which at times seems even more convincing than the all-male production at the Globe. The success of the all-female production is, above all, the result of splendid acting, especially on the part of the title hero. The vicious and bloodthirsty Richard III is acted superbly by Kathryn Hunter. For almost three hours, the audience experiences the breathtaking transformation of the actress, her body bent in a crooked pose, her gestures, her facial expression and her voice into the sarcastic, megalomaniac and flirty Richard III in all his fascination, repulsiveness and devilishness. These aspects are convincingly played out in the seduction scenes, when Hunter focuses on Richard as the invincibly powerful malevolent male. All the other actresses playing the male parts are equally strong and convincing in their display of "masculine" nobility, such as Buckingham (Amanda Harris) and Richmond (Louise Bush). Obviously, there are two "minor" characters whom one cannot omit, namely the two Princes of Wales hilariously and also tragically played by Laura Rogers and Liza Hayden. Significantly, none of the actresses attempt to emulate stereotypical notions of masculine movement, posture, or pitch of voice. They can do without this and still be convincing as kings, lords, dukes or princes.

6 At the same time, if we look closer at the female characters in Richard III, with strongly powdered and rouged faces, we immediately notice that women in this play are portrayed not only as disempowered and more distanced from the audience than the male roles (above all Richard himself), but also as highly artificial. All the female characters are highborn English women, and the role given to them within their society (a woman as a property acquired by a noble male figure) is exhibited in their acting. Thus there are no

crucial differences between the women but for the moments when they exercise their limited power by means of witchcraft. Yet, even when women try to use witchcraft against the murderous male devil, they are still denied individuality. Thus, this all-female production achieves many things at the same time: It foregrounds that in the world portrayed femininity is merely enactment, a social role ascribed, while focusing on the powerful potential of women, and questioning our preconceived gender-notions.

7 This complex strategy is reinforced by its mixing of the comic and the tragic, distancing the audience as well as drawing it into events. The audience's engagement and active participation is particularly well enhanced through strategies of direct interaction, realised most impressively in the coronation scene, when Amanda Harris as Buckingham encourages the "public" to plead with Richard to take the crown and save the "poor mob" dispossessed of the leader.

8 Summing up, both productions are successful and iridescent with meaning as far as the question of gender is concerned. Both plays expose notions of masculinity, and probe into questions of dichotomous gender constructions. And both productions show how historical changes - and continuities - with regard to gender issues can be used in creative productions for the present.