

---

Tony Howard. *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 340. \$90 cloth.

Tony Howard's lively and informative study draws our attention to the fact that the extensive history of Shakespeare's most famous character includes an extraordinary and rather unexpected presence of women including, remarkably, the first Hamlet on film and, in all likelihood, the first Hamlet on the radio (1). Howard tells us that since the mid-nineteenth century more than two hundred professional actresses across the globe have played the role of the procrastinating protagonist and his *Women as Hamlet* impressively examines a wide selection of those performances in the theatre and on film as well as looking to representations in other media including the visual arts and fiction.

The project starts by situating some of the most famous female Hamlets among the number of *travesti* roles on the professional stage. This includes, of course, Sarah Siddons in the eighteenth century along with Charlotte Cushman and Sarah Bernhardt in the nineteenth. Detailed and carefully nuanced accounts of their performances—for example, Howard creates a vivid picture of Cushman's Hamlet, drawn from the actress's own prompt book—provide a fine sense of how their presentations were realized and received. Howard also looks specifically at this historical trajectory in the context of emerging discourse and activism around women's rights: for example, he notes of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's popular "sensation" novel, *Eleanor's Victory*, that it was a rewriting of *Hamlet* "as a feminist social critique" (73).

Howard's painstaking research reveals an extensive traffic of female Hamlets in and among many different countries—work for which there was clearly an enthusiastic audience. Bernhardt's *Hamlet* "in fifteen scenes with musical interludes lasted almost five hours" (101), somewhat incredible to contemplate today, even for the play's most ardent fans. But, as the author notes, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the ascendance of the theatre director—almost always a man—and, in this context, while "[t]he history of female Hamlets had been a matter of performance and self-presentation, about the self-defining power of the Actress; now, with the rise of the Director, it became a question of interpretation" (114).

If the female Hamlet on the stage became, in the twentieth century, "officially absurd" (129), Howard argues that theatre's new competitor, the medium of film, provided an important venue for work by women. The Photo-Cinéma-Théâtre of Madame Marguerite Chenu was a sought-after at-

traction at the Paris Exposition of 1900 where audiences packed in to see the new invention—film—including Bernhardt in *The Duel Scene from 'Hamlet,'* a two-minute feature that marked the first performance of the role on screen and, as Howard notes, unlike “every Hamlet before her, Bernhardt’s survived, if only as a fragment, adding to the legend of her ‘divinity’ (138). Without doubt, the most striking female Hamlet of the silent screen was Danish-born actress Asta Nielsen. This production is especially interesting as the first for her own company, Art Film, and as a significant box office success (taking more money than any other film in Germany that year, 1920) (142). Of all the remarkable female Hamlets Howard discusses in this book, it may well be the case that he loves Nielsen’s best of all; indeed, this would put him in good company since he notes that her work inspired both Garbo and Dietrich (145). In any event, Howard records a kind of prescience in Nielsen’s film as “gross gender stereotypes represent the conservative rearground against which Hamlet stands out as modern and complex, mapping debates film theorists would explore half a century later” (155).

Other case studies cover a variety of film and stage female Hamlets during the twentieth century, generally in contexts of political tension. Howard includes, for example, the moving story of Zinaida Raikh, wife of famed director Vsevolod Meyerhold: “Her life, her interest in *Hamlet*, and many of the iconic roles she played reflected the struggles of committed artists under Stalin” (161)—both she and Meyerhold were murdered for their dissident art. Further examples come from Poland, Spain, Turkey, and Ireland—very different female Hamlets, but each representing a powerful political response to repressive conditions in their home countries. Later chapters in Howard’s book draw attention to the prevalence of female Hamlets in post-war British fiction (writing by Harold Pinter, John Fowles, Iris Murdoch, Ian McEwan and Angela Carter) as well as in Hollywood and other film.

The book concludes with analysis of what the author suggests were two landmark productions in traditional theatre cities, London and New York: Frances de la Tour’s performance in Robert Walker’s 1979 production of the play at the New Half Moon Theatre in London and Diane Verona’s in Joseph Papp’s production for the New York Public Theater (1982). The first was an explicit response to the election of Mrs. Thatcher and certainly resonated with the increasingly strained relationship between feminism and socialism at this particular historical moment (267, 270); the second was a critical failure, quickly “buried” (to repeat Howard’s choice of word) (273), but remembered, however, because of a fifty-minute television documentary, *Joseph Papp Presents: Rehearsing 'Hamlet': The Work Process of the Public Theater Stage Production Directed by Joseph Papp* which Howard summarizes as an account

“of an actress’ troubled creativity and the benign paternalism of her director” (273). Two films are the subject of the book’s final studies: *All Men are Mortal* (1995)—an adaptation of a Simone de Beauvoir novel—and *Le Polygraphe* (1996), the screen version of an earlier performance piece by Quebec artists Robert Lepage and Marie Brassard. Both “put actresses who play Hamlet at their centre and offered more ambitious explorations of the *topos* than cinema had seen since Asta Nielsen” (300).

So what should we make of such a comprehensive discussion of the very many women who have, in different periods, in different media, in different languages, and in many different places in the world, played Hamlet? Howard writes: “this book has been an attempt to uncover some partially forgotten histories and is a tiny part of the process of reclamation that ensures that somehow the ephemeral art of theatre is not always lost to time. [...] What matters is whether we have attempted to understand what these Hamlets experienced. If not, and the past is silence, then silence is the future too” (316). Without question this is a signal book for its revision of typical histories of both the play and its eponymous hero. The sheer quantity of performances recorded here, even apart from the distinctive quality of the author’s description and analysis of those many performances, should have the effect of changing the terms and conditions under which Shakespeare scholars think about this text. Equally, however, this is an important book for interrogating the assumptions under which theatre historians have come to represent “women and performance” in the twentieth century. Howard’s trajectory suggests a much longer timeline than our standard histories would acknowledge. The book is also effective in destabilizing the emphasis, still, on English-language productions. In other words, *Women as Hamlet* is not only an extraordinary archive of imaginative work until now neglected in discussions of Shakespearean performance, but it is also, and significantly, an extended challenge to assumptions of gender, genre, geography, and history that clearly yet need further scrutiny.

Susan Bennett