

CROSS-GENDER SHAKESPEARE AND
ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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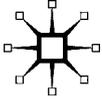


CROSS-GENDER SHAKESPEARE AND
ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

WEARING THE CODPIECE

Elizabeth Klett

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CROSS-GENDER SHAKESPEARE AND ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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For Adam.

“My affection hath an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal.”

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PREFACE

I first became interested in women's cross-gender performances of Shakespeare as a graduate student at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon. In February 1997, I saw Kathryn Hunter's remarkable performance as King Lear at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre. In March, I watched Fiona Shaw's portrayal of Richard II on television. And that same month, I played the role of Hubert in our student production of *King John*. These experiences stimulated a lasting interest in the topic, and they also provoked a number of pressing questions. How does an audience member read and respond to the presence of an actress in a male role? How does an actress prepare for and embody a male role in performance? This book is an attempt to answer these and other questions raised by this fascinating performance practice that has undergone a renaissance on the British stage.

My experience playing Hubert was fraught and anxious. I had been cast in the role out of practical, rather than artistic, concerns; our company was short on men, and I was not the only cross-cast actress in the production. I was certain that I would never be man enough for the role; Hubert has to be frightening enough to convince the audience that he could burn out young Prince Arthur's eyes with red-hot pokers. The role is usually cast with a large and burly actor, who is often twice the size of every other man on stage. My fears were particularly confirmed when I proved physically unable to pick up Arthur's body and carry him offstage, and the actor playing the Bastard had to do it instead. The rehearsal process was difficult, as I went through many of the stages that actresses experience when trying to come to terms with a male role: making my physical movements more "masculine," playing with costume effects to disguise my body, and lowering my voice to convey a more threatening tone. I eventually abandoned all of these devices, walked and talked like myself, and provided my own costume of turtleneck, jeans, and Doc Marten boots. (Like many low-budget student performances, this

was a modern dress production.) Most importantly, I found the emotional resources within myself to play the scene with Arthur, instead of trying to approximate how a “real man” would do it. Ultimately, the director told me that my performance brought out a different aspect of the character for her: Hubert became a man who had to visibly work himself up to violence, rather than one to whom it came naturally. In each of the productions that I consider in this book, the effects are similar, and I conclude that women’s cross-gender performance has the potential to open up Shakespeare’s plays to new and transformational meanings.

I would like to thank two of the personnel from that production of *King John* for setting me on the road to this book: L. Grace Godwin, who gave me the first newspaper articles on this topic, and Jacquie Walters, who gave me the chance to think far outside my usual sphere of experience. I am also grateful to Fiona Shaw for talking with me about her experience of playing Richard II and to Helena Kaut-Howson, who welcomed me into her home and shared her memories of directing *King Lear*. I would like to thank the staff at the following libraries and archives: the National Theatre Archive, the Young Vic Theatre Archive, the Globe Theatre Archive, the London Theatre Museum, the Shakespeare Institute Library, the University of Illinois Library, and the Woodson Research Center and Fondren Library at Rice University. In particular, Dr. Jaq Bessell was a great help in arranging research time and tickets at the Globe, and in talking with me about the rehearsal process for *The Tempest*. My research in Britain was made possible by travel grants from the University of Illinois Graduate College and the Department of English. The Faculty Research and Support Fund at the University of Houston—Clear Lake provided financial support for this project at the publication stage.

My sincere thanks are due to Carol Thomas Neely, my adviser at the University of Illinois, who has remained an inspiring mentor, and also to Ania Loomba, Michael Shapiro, and Julia A. Walker. I am grateful to my scholarship group in Houston for keeping me on track with the revisions: Karen Fang, Kasi Jackson, Ann Kennedy, Kat McLellan, Stacey Peebles, and Jeanne Scheper. Thanks are also due to Roberta Barker and L. Grace Godwin for reading drafts of the first chapter. And finally, I owe my most profound gratitude to my parents, Don and Elaine Klett, and my husband, Adam Hodges, whose understanding, encouragement, and love have sustained me through this entire process.