



“It’s My Role and I’ll Cry if I Want To”: An All-Female *Hamlet* Claims Non-Gender Production Space

by Brooke Johnson. Published in 2018 Issue 1.

For the production: *All-Female Hamlet* (2018, East Tennessee State University Department of Theatre & Dance). Performance attended: 2018-11-30. See production details at the end of the review.

HOW DOES ONE REMOVE GENDER FROM A MALE-DRIVEN PLAY LIKE *HAMLET*? THE ORIGINAL CAST HAS ONLY two female roles and compared to the play’s 4,000 or so lines those two women speak only a combined 400 of those. Female subjection runs rampant in the play, with memorable, misogynistic lines like “Frailty thy name is woman.” This all-female production sought to transcend gender, but for much of the performance, binary gender remained highly legible on the stage. Nevertheless, in the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude, extremities of feeling did transcend binary gender expression, leading this viewer to focus on the love between these two characters and their shared humanity, rather than on binary gender identities.

This production made other interventions. The script was cut down to a measly sixty minutes, a quarter of the run time of the usual combined text. Because of this, and partly owing to the fact that the cast was composed of a seven-person class at the university, some characters were omitted for the sake of time. Fortinbras was among the most “vital” of these characters.

Performed in East Tennessee State University’s “Black Box” theater, with the audience surrounding a small taped-off square performance space bisected by a diagonal path for entrances and exits, the actual show began with the infamous “To be or not to be” speech, recited by the company. Each cast member peeled away from a seat in the audience to proclaim their part before

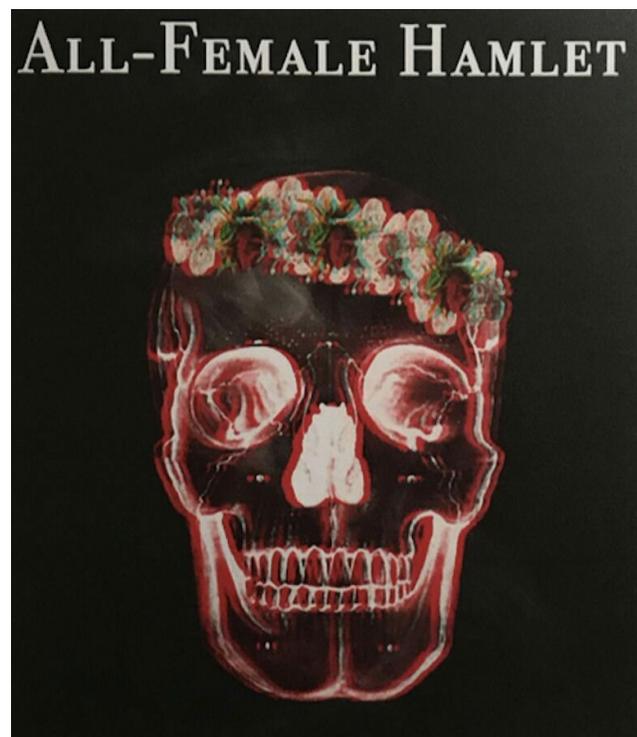


Figure 1. Promotional image courtesy of East Tennessee State University Department of Theatre & Dance.

walking the diagonal path and exiting. Following the speech, the play officially began with Claudius's wedding dialogue in act 1, scene 2.

It perhaps would have been more apt to call the production "Non-Gender Hamlet," a title suited to the play's university campus production values, which traditionally are considered more respectful and inclusive of difference. Such positively expressed titling would not have gone over well, however, in viciously conservative East Tennessee. What the players lacked in advance advertising, they made up for with pre-performance explanation.

The performance began with co-director Danielle Byington explaining the goals of the production in what the program note describes as an attempt to "conquer the need to represent gender specifically." By erasing the notion of gender from the performance space, the cast could approach their characters as they saw fit. As the actor who played Hamlet noted in a Q&A session after the show, "if I think my Hamlet cries, he's going to cry without worrying about whether or not that is a 'feminine' thing to do."

At first, I did not find myself able to dismiss gender in my viewing of the performance. As I watched this familiar tale unfold, I pondered, as I normally do, the many decisions each of these actors made in relation to inflection of lines, character development, and various points of contention that all productions of *Hamlet* must struggle with. Does Hamlet truly go mad? Is King Hamlet's ghost a figment of Hamlet Jr.'s imagination? Does Ophelia commit suicide, and, if so, why? In my ponderings, gender was almost always at the back of my mind, despite the production's goal of erasure. Ophelia and Laertes skip around in a circle like female children as the latter parts for France, Claudius calls Hamlet "Madame" during the wedding speech, and every character had moments in which they shed a few tears. I began to question whether the "erasure of gender" was actually more like mounting a great, big flashing sign upon the issue rather than covering it up. The performance attempted to make me forget about gender's existence with its takes on those aforementioned points of contention, yet the great effort that was put into making me forget about gender's presence only seemed to highlight it.

This was the case until the very last scene, when I was compelled by some truly splendid acting that made me reevaluate everything I had ever learned about this play. That acting is truly what gave this performance flight and drew me away from the contemplation over what the production's attempted erasure of gender did or did not change.

The performance of Claudius by junior Madison Phillips blurred the lines of villainy and verged on tenderness, which was displayed through concealed, soft touches between Claudius and Gertrude. The couple truly seemed to be in love, suggesting a compelling motive for the murder of King Hamlet. Phillips left no doubt that Claudius was guilty of the treasonous act, but played

the role in such a way that, despite the act's violence, the character was still a feeling human, a loving husband who, even as the poison destroys him from the inside, reaches for his wife.

This action in particular was what truly penetrated my previous ponderings on gender. The powerful emotions of love and grief brought forth by a gifted actor who understood their role more than any Claudius I'd ever seen before—on stage or screen—allowed me to forget about the issue that plagued me throughout the performance. While talking after the play, Phillips told me that villainy is an easy choice in the case of Claudius's character. So many people hate the character without giving it a second thought. Phillips made their audience stop and rethink past perceptions. The role will forever be altered in my own mind because of their performance and because gender never came up during our conversation.

Specifically, in the case of Phillips's Claudius, gender didn't matter. The acting and the all-important choice to play one of the most characteristic villains in all of literature as a misunderstood and caring husband gave me the opportunity to see this production as more than a suppression of sexual difference.

Upon leaving the play, I pondered other productions that could perhaps benefit from transcending gender. Even though my understanding was perhaps belated and strenuous, I find I am changed because of it. More plays should strive to do what this production has done. To quote the great feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman." This production, however, reversed the process and made this group of seven women become human.

References

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage-Random House, 1974.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	<i>All-Female Hamlet</i>
<i>Year</i>	2018
<i>Theatre Company</i>	East Tennessee State University Department of Theatre & Dance
<i>Theatre</i>	Campus Center Building 205
<i>Start Date</i>	2018-11-28
<i>End Date</i>	2018-11-30

Cast

HAMLET	MADISEN EVANS
KING CLAUDIUS/GHOST	MADISON PHILLIPS
GERTRUDE/GRAVEDIGGER CHORUS	MADLYN GOWARD
POLONIUS/GRAVEDIGGER CHORUS	AIMEE ROBINSON
OPHELIA/GRAVEDIGGER 1 & CHORUS/LUCIANUS	SHELBY TYLER
LAERTES/GRAVEDIGGER CHORUS/PLAYER QUEEN	LUCY MCGEE
HORATIO/GRAVEDIGGER CHORUS/PLAYER KING	HANNAH TIBERI

Creatives

DIRECTORS	PATRICK CRONIN AND DANIELLE BYINGTON
LIGHT AND SOUND	HUNTER THOMAS AND MADISON PHILLIPS