Conclusion
'This Is What You Came to See'

In the winter of 2019, Shakespeare's Globe performed an adapted version of *2* and *3 Henry VI* in repertory with *Richard III*.[1] The productions were a continuation of a year-long project that began with productions of *Henry IV Parts 1* and *2* and *Henry V* in the outdoor Globe space in the summer of 2019, then brought most of the same company of actors indoors to perform their *Henry VI* and *Richard III* in the indoor Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. The two halves of the production were thus aesthetically and conceptually distinct, conceived and designed with different spaces and potential audiences in mind. They were also led by two separate directorial and design teams, meaning that the company of actors (with some departures and replacements between the two halves) was the only point of direct continuity between the two halves of the cycle. The cycle, a continuation of artistic director Michelle Terry's 'Globe Ensemble' project, deployed casting practices that Terry described in an interview as 'anti-literal', in practice meaning that the company was cast without direct regard for race, gender, or age.[2] This included, for example, the casting of Sarah Amankwah as Prince Hal and Henry V, the first Black British woman to play the role across all three plays, and long-time Globe actor Colin Hurley as Princess Katherine in the summer; and, in the winter, Steffan Donnelly as Queen Margaret and Sophie Russell as Richard III.

While Terry chose to describe this casting as 'non-literal' rather than the more common gender, race, or age 'blind', the designers of both sets of plays (Jessica Worrall in the summer and Grace Smart in the winter)

[1] I was a rehearsal room researcher and dramaturg on these productions, and was present throughout the production process, including helping to conflate and adapt their version of *Henry VI*. Reflections are taken from my own journals and personal conversations with and observations of the company over the course of the rehearsal and performance processes.

[2] Jennifer Edwards, 'We're Deciding What the World Is Together', *Henry IV Part 1, or Hotspur* programme (Shakespeare's Globe, 2019).

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established relatively clear aesthetics of gendered division, with female characters styled in simplified Elizabethan-inspired gowns in the summer season and contemporary suit dresses in the winter, and extensive debates in both seasons over whether or not Hurley and Donnelly would wear wigs (ultimately, they did not, but Jonathan Broadbent as Hostess Quickly did). Though in the winter season there was some fluidity when it came to female actors playing male characters, who were sometimes costumed in suits that had a distinctly feminine cut (Russell as Richard and Mattie Houghton as Somerset were two examples), female characters' gender was indicated much more bluntly, with clear and direct gendered signifiers (skirts, fitted bodices).

Despite these aesthetic parallels for the two sets of female characters, the rehearsal and performance experiences for the actors in female roles in the summer and winter were very different – in part, because the majority of the small number of female roles in the summer season were performed by male actors, whose experiences were therefore primarily informed by negotiating the process of creating and navigating an unfamiliar gender performance – much more so than for the women playing male roles, almost all of whom had experience playing male Shakespearean roles either professionally or in drama school.[3] The case of the winter season, featuring such prominent and complex female roles as Queen Margaret, Lady Elizabeth and the Duchess of Gloucester, raised different questions.

Actor Nina Bowers was cast in outspoken and dynamic roles in the summer season: the Douglas in *Henry IV Part 1*, the Lord Chief Justice in *Henry IV Part 2*, and Williams, the soldier who criticises King Henry V over a campfire in *Henry V*. These parts shared an unflinching resistance to unjust authority, and a willingness to risk danger in order to speak one's mind. They were also all male roles. In the winter season, she was double cast as Suffolk at the beginning of *Henry VI* and Lady Elizabeth Grey at the end of *Henry VI* and in *Richard III*, roles which seemed to continue her motif of playing characters who vocally chafed against established authority. However, Bowers found the contrast between these two roles difficult to manage. She noticed that she was inhabiting the same place in the

[3] Many of the actors did have very interesting reflections on the experience of playing male roles in a play deeply concerned with masculinity and martial prowess – and, in the cases of Sarah Amankwah as Henry and Helen Schlesinger as Falstaff, when the roles are very famous – but that is beyond the scope of this study.

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rehearsal room as her characters did in the plays: as Suffolk, confident and happy to share her thoughts with the room; as Elizabeth, constantly second-guessing herself, afraid that her ideas were intrusive, distracting, and unwelcome. Actor Mattie Houghton likewise struggled to navigate the distance between her early role as the Duke of Somerset and subsequent portrayal of Lady Anne in *Richard III*. Neither Houghton nor Bowers felt at ease in *Richard III*. Like their characters, it seemed to both actors that they were in a constant battle to be heard, fighting to have their characters' stories and emotional journeys taken seriously. Both admitted to sometimes feeling anger and resentment towards audiences who laughed at Richard during their respective scenes with him, even while acknowledging that his lines as written are funny and naturally invite such a response. But they felt themselves confined to a different dramatic world than Richard, one that did not permit them to take control of either the performance or the rehearsal process – a position they were able to recognise as stemming specifically from their roles within the play because they were having completely different emotional experiences playing powerful men in *Henry VI* at the very same time.

A similar frustration was shared by Jonathan Broadbent, who played King Henry VI, and expressed disappointment with himself that he was unable to feel he had ever really controlled the course of the play or even of his own performance. In contrast to the easy, comfortable and powerful experience of playing Buckingham in *Richard III*, as Henry he felt at the mercy of other actors' decisions on a given night, especially those of the actor playing Margaret. He was, he felt, not fully able to shape his own onstage story.

This book has sought to demonstrate the integral role female characters play in Shakespeare's understanding of historical drama. Textually, those who inhabit a feminine historical position – which can include men, like Henry VI – are simultaneously excluded from the historical frame and empowered by this exclusion. Existing at the margins of the drama, they challenge the very narrative structures that exclude them, pointing to untold stories, unresolved efforts, and the artificiality of their plays' dramaturgy. From outside the linear narrative of history, they can look to both past and future with unique clarity. Rather than being seen as excluded from or exceptions to the expected patterns of a history play, female characters' vital presence must be permitted to reshape our understanding of a history play's form and purpose, transforming it from cohesive ideological tool to a contested, multivocal form that does not seek to disguise its limitations. Bowers, Houghton and Broadbent's

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difficulties locating this form of empowerment in rehearsal stemmed in part from the struggle of shedding common assumptions about what a history play is for, and how characters within a historical narrative must act if they are to be seen as important. This had implications in performance and in rehearsal alike, as Bowers and Houghton in particular felt that the apparently inessential roles their female characters played meant they did not have the right to speak up about their discomfort, and that time spent on their difficulties was time wasted, taken from more important scenes – an impression reinforced by the strict time constraints posed by traditional British rehearsal processes, which demanded that the limited rehearsal hours available were, necessarily, often focussed on the much larger role of Richard. Thus, professional rehearsal processes in Britain and the United States often take on the shape of traditional historical narratives: a powerful male role at the centre, everyone else – women in particular – inevitably pushed to the sides.

The nature of Broadbent's conflict was somewhat different. Playing a man and the titular character, he battled assumptions not only about how a male character ought to exercise power, but also how a history play should be built structurally around a single, central protagonist. When *Henry VI* failed to support a now-traditional tragic protagonist's journey for Henry, Broadbent feared it was his failure as an actor to understand Henry's character, not the lack of such an arc in the text. Even adapted, as this production was, a centralised storyline for Henry did not and could not be made to exist. Broadbent's frustrations arguably mirrored Henry's own state of mind at his failures to emulate his more-powerful father – a father whose plays much more deliberately and recognisably centre him as their protagonist.

All three actors' experiences in rehearsal paralleled their characters' struggles with power and marginalisation in the plays themselves, an unexpected synchronicity that points to the importance of revising our understanding of the role of feminine characters in Shakespeare's history plays. More than just an abstract scholarly fact, it has a bearing on who feels welcome, comfortable and, most of all, important to the process of reproducing Shakespeare's vision of history. Moreover, it is a vision we continue to reproduce in other forms, as our historical films, plays and novels are still shaped in Shakespeare's image: a man, usually a leader or ruler, whose personal rise (and often fall) structures the drama. The diversity of tones and forms of historical storytelling from the early modern period, from ballads to historical comedies, have been effaced by the

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dominance of Shakespeare's predominantly masculine, tragically-inflected vision of history. Complicating that vision is therefore a means of undermining this patriarchal dramaturgy at its root which, as the experiences of these actors demonstrates, can possibly transform artists' interactions with Shakespeare in practical ways. Participation in history does not have to be limited to the deeds of lords and politicians, and those deeds do not need to be the types of things – debates, battles, murders – that make up the accepted key points on the typical historical timeline. If we reject the inaccurate assumption that, from its beginnings, the history play genre has had no place for women, and instead learn to read the things female characters do as not only a valid but an essential form of history, we will beget new histories, and new ways of telling them.

Bowers, Broadbent, and Houghton's experiences complicate any desire to conclude that the feminine space of the history plays articulated by this book is unequivocally powerful or even comfortable to inhabit as a modern performer. These characters are manipulated and exposed. Their powerful tools of history-telling, prophecy and cursing are all ultimately rooted in their grief, and that profound loss must be laid bare for public display. We cannot know how early modern actors subjectively experienced the performance of emotional vulnerability, but for most contemporary performers, trained in and accustomed to a naturalistic style of acting, it is an experience that demands some degree of personal emotional exposure. The displays of virtuosic lament that may have been designed as showcases for talented boy actors have become the entry fee for female actors to participate in many of Shakespeare's plays today, including the histories. They must demonstrate their talent for raw emotion, for undergoing loss and abuse (and looking pretty while doing it), in order to have a place within these stories. The dramaturgical structures that render these characters essential to Shakespeare's vision of history exist above and outside the individual experience of inhabiting a role and may not necessarily be a source of emotional or practical comfort when faced with the demands of actually performing these characters.

A deeper collective understanding of the essential nature of these roles perhaps would have allowed Bowers and Houghton to feel more secure in the complicated position their characters inhabit, reassured that audiences and fellow artists alike would not begrudge them taking the stage. Broadbent, too, may have found a more helpful way to understand why the titular character he portrayed failed to act as a protagonist apparently should, and therefore rest confident that his inability to control the

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narrative would not be perceived as a flawed performance. But my aim has not necessarily been to defend Shakespeare, or to claim that his depictions of female characters are in fact positive or feminist – only that they are purposeful, and, in neglecting them, we neglect a key to understanding his relationship to dramatising history. While the secondary roles female characters play in Shakespeare's histories look a bit like the kind of perfunctory gesture towards a wider world that we see in many otherwise narrowly focused historical films and plays written today, with token female characters or characters of colour placed in cameo or supporting roles, these female characters' structural position is anything but thoughtless. The consistency of the dramaturgy of Shakespeare's female roles across the history plays is remarkable: they narrate alternative genealogies, view both past and future with unique clarity, strain at the boundaries of their genre in distinctive but shared ways, and embed throughout the histories a correlation between gender and power. Female characters are an inescapable, set feature of how Shakespeare constructs a history play, one of the stock elements he draws upon as reliably as battle scenes, doomed heirs, cheeky clowns, and reluctant kings who undergo a dark night of the soul. But as these anecdotes about the Globe Ensemble's histories have sought to illustrate, there are limits to what his vision can offer to artists of today. My aim is not to justify Shakespeare, or to insist that actors who feel marginalised by his texts are wrong to do so. Rather, by digging into the nature of Shakespeare's dramatic structures, it is my hope that we can begin to see and understand our Shakespearean dramaturgical inheritance more clearly, and begin to accept its features not as inevitabilities, but as artistic choices that need not always be replicated.

Bowers, Broadbent and Houghton each separately found the same means of resisting the uncomfortable confinement of their marginalised roles. Like the female characters this book has described, they turned to the fact of their embodied presence onstage, the power of silence, their ability to briefly and quietly break the drama's frame, in order to gain some control over their place in the story. In moments – Broadbent before each of the adapted *Henry VI*'s two intervals and at the end of the play, Bowers and Houghton during their scenes with Richard in *Richard III* – each of the three would look to the audience. All three understood the gesture differently: as a wordless cry for help, or a means of holding the audience to account, or a demand that someone meet their eyes, or a moment to try to find an audience member who seemed sympathetic to what their characters were suffering rather than delighted by Richard's manipulations. Describing her thought process as Elizabeth as she gazed out at the

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audience for several moments after bidding farewell to the imprisoned Princes in the Tower, Bowers said, 'I'm just looking out there thinking, "This is what you came to see. You came to see my babies get killed"'. In this inadvertently shared, extratextual means of asserting control over roles that left them feeling powerless and marginalised, all three actors tapped into the textual power that these female and effeminate roles hold. With a look outwards, they invited the audience to consider the possibility of other stories, to contemplate the histories left untold, to imagine the words they did not have the space to say.

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