

Something's Different in the State of Denmark; or,
What If Horatio Were a Girl?

Haviva Avirom
Candidate for Master of Arts
Theatre History
Spring 2011

At the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) conference in the summer of 2010 in Banff, Alberta, a conversation was convened about feminism and dramaturgy, and how the feminist perspectives of the dramaturg might apply to theatre production. One participant raised the issue of the trend in production toward cross-casting male roles with female performers, particularly in Shakespeare¹. The discussion that ensued addressed the audience confusion that can occur in cases where the gender switch affects plot and character development in ways that the production did not fully anticipate. In order to avoid such confusion, production teams must carefully analyze the effect of a gender swap on the story they wish to tell. A dramaturg is a valuable asset here, as she may both draw together research and analyze the effect that the gender switch has on the text, while providing the critical eye in rehearsals to ensure that such choices do not confuse the story, in effect serving as the audience's voice in the rehearsal room. As an example of the pre-production assistance a dramaturg may render in this circumstance, this article addresses the effect of a gender switch of the character of Horatio in a production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, presented for a modern twenty-first century audience. Though I aim to be prescriptive, the thoughts laid out here should not be interpreted as the only options possible when cross-casting Horatio. As Judith Shakespeare Company² artistic director Joanne Zipay puts it, "things change when they're on their feet," and some choices may only become apparent when there are actual bodies inhabiting the roles (Zipay). Instead, my goal is to provide a jumping off point in explorations of gender surrounding Horatio's role. Some of the effects of, and changes necessary for, making Horatio a woman are textual and can be addressed in pre-production, some will become clear only in rehearsal, but the

¹ We specifically discussed recent productions including a female Richard III, Julie Taymor's then upcoming film adaptation of *The Tempest* with a female Prospero, and the work of local companies in New York and Minneapolis.

² Judith Shakespeare Company is based in New York and is known for its work in gender-bending Shakespeare's works. Artistic Director Joanne Zipay founded the company to give women more opportunities to perform Shakespeare. Part of the company's mission states that each production must be cast at least 50% female.

gender swap will likely mitigate both the play's apparent misogyny³ and that of the Prince himself.

Horatio is written as a "fellow-student" of Prince Hamlet from the University at Wittenberg, Germany (*Hamlet* I.ii.167). The text is unclear as to whether Horatio is himself a Dane or a foreigner who became friends with the prince during their time at school. His remark at the end of the play, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane," would seem to imply Danish heritage, but at the beginning of the play, he is unaware of Danish royal drinking customs (V ii 346, I iv 7-20). He knows more about the military history of Denmark than the definitely Danish guardsmen, Barnardo, Marcellus, and Francisco, but also claims to have seen King Hamlet only once (I.i.83-110, I.ii.186). These inconsistencies have been debated by scholars such as W. Edward Farrison and Percy Simpson, but they are ultimately not resolvable. From a production standpoint the only option is for the actor playing Horatio and the director to come to an agreement about Horatio's back-story to serve their specific production.

Throughout the play, Horatio is presented as Hamlet's best friend and most trusted confidant. He is privy to Hamlet's feigned madness plot. After seeing the ghost, the Prince mentions that he "hereafter shall think meet/To put an antic disposition on" and swears Horatio, and Barnardo, who is also present, to silence on the plot (I.v.166-168). Horatio is the only one who knows the truth behind Hamlet's stunt with the players (III.ii.75-90). In fact, Hamlet enlists him as an accomplice to watch Claudius's response to the drama, telling Horatio to "give him [Claudius] heedful note" while Hamlet will himself study only the king's face for signs of guilt (III.ii.84). When Hamlet is banished to England, Horatio's importance at the Danish court seems

³ Misogyny is essentially a late 19th and 20th century concept. From an Early Modern standpoint, Hamlet's treatment of the women in his life is completely justified, it was considered the duty of men to keep control of 'their' women, often by way of threats and violence (Hunt 81). However, an audience today may not share this view and it is important for a modern theatre practitioner to keep her audience in mind.

to grow: he advises the Queen of Denmark herself and acts as babysitter to Ophelia in her madness (IV.v). When Hamlet returns, Horatio is once more solidly at his side, advising him and offering warnings about the duel (V.ii.205-214). After the fatal blows have been dealt, Hamlet entrusts his legacy to Horatio. He passes his proxy vote in the Danish election to Horatio, which should be the deciding vote that will make Fortinbras the next king of Denmark (V.ii.360-361). And perhaps most importantly, Hamlet gives Horatio the responsibility of telling his story, which is all that will remain of Hamlet after his death (V.ii.343-363). He literally commends all that posterity will ever know about him to the one man he trusts above all others, Horatio.

As one of the least verbose characters in *Hamlet*, with only 290 lines of the text's nearly four thousand⁴, Horatio provides a critical function in the play, balancing the wildness of Hamlet's "antic disposition" with a staunch, stoic, and quiet loyalty (Schoff 53, I.v.180). He is present at most of the turning points of the play: the opening, Hamlet's meeting with the ghost, Hamlet's return to Denmark, and the fatal duel at the end. Perhaps most importantly, he is the only central character who survives the bloodbath. Because of this, Horatio is essentially cast as the narrator of the story. So important is this narrator's role that Horatio may function as the audience's stand-in. In her novel *Tam Lin*, Pamela Dean has her heroine, Janet, attend a production of *Hamlet*, and she finds herself watching Horatio as he watches everyone else. She notes that Horatio's reactions are "like a commentary that point[s] up all the important points" (Dean 147). Indeed, although Horatio is a minor character in terms of simple line-count, he is often present at crucial moments, viewing the proceedings and providing a silent reaction. By

⁴ There is currently a great deal of controversy surrounding the three texts of *Hamlet*, Quartos 1 and 2, and the First Folio (Jenstad). For purposes of this essay, the control text is the Arden second edition, which uses a blend of Q2 and F. Though there are significant differences between the three texts, the overall methodology suggested in this article applies regardless of the text involved.

observing more than participating in the action, Horatio provides a sane and reliable perspective on the action, and one ideal for a narrator.

If this narrator were to be a woman, the production would provide a much-needed female perspective on a story that is dominated by men. As written, *Hamlet* contains only Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, and his 'girlfriend,' Ophelia. There is some suggestion that in the past Hamlet had a warm and loving relationship with both. His mother's earnest entreaties that he stay in Denmark at the beginning of the play seem like those of a mother who is close to her son (I.ii.118-19). The poetry that Ophelia received in the past from Hamlet sounds like that of a man deeply in love. Hamlet clearly says "I love thee best, O most best, believe it" (II.ii.120). However, within the action of the play, he berates, physically attacks, and emotionally lambastes each woman (III.i.103-151, III.iv.7-103). Hamlet's relationship with the only two female characters in the play is antagonistic and abusive, creating an overall impression that the prince is misogynistic.

His treatment of Gertrude is relentlessly judgmental and cruel. During his first encounter with her onstage, he dismisses her concerns over his grief with the snide comment, "'seems' madam – nay it is, I know not 'seems'," and, once in private, he rains curses on her head and on that of all her gender, slandering half the human race in saying "frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii.76, I.ii.146). Mother and son meet again at the Players' performance. Gertrude appears to try to placate her wayward son, once again offering him kind words and desiring his presence close to her, and he rebuffs her (III.ii.107-108). When discussing the play itself, Hamlet is cutting and rude to his mother, intentionally goading her into a state of guilt (III.ii.224-226).

It is when Hamlet is alone with his mother that his misogyny is most evident. Hamlet and Gertrude's longest scene together is also their most intimate. He takes her to task for her

marriage to his uncle and expresses contradictory views about women and sexuality that show that he is both judgmental and ignorant of female sexuality. Hamlet both blames Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius on sexuality run amok— "O most wicked speed! To post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets"—and at the same time claims that she has no such sexuality because of her age: "for at your age/The heyday of the blood is tame" (I.ii.156-157, III.iv.68-69). Based on Gertrude's cry for help—"What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?/Help, ho!"—it can also be understood that Hamlet physically assaults her in some way and thinks himself entirely justified, as he makes no apology for his actions (III.iv.20-21).

The final meeting between Hamlet and Gertrude occurs at the climactic duel. Again, Gertrude appears conciliatory, saluting her son and "carous[ing] to [his] fortune" (V.ii.292). When she realizes that her demise is imminent, she uses her last breath to attempt to warn him of the danger if he accepts the cup the king has offered him: "the drink, the drink, O my dear Hamlet,/the drink, the drink – I am poisoned" (V.ii.315-316). In return, Hamlet does nothing. He is already furious at Claudius from the ghost's imprecations and his reason for stabbing the king a moment later is that Laertes has revealed the king's plot against Hamlet: "the point envenomed too? Then venom to thy work!" (V.ii.327). His one concession to her act of maternal courage is the line "follow my mother"; however, since he has anticipated Claudius's entry into hell for several scenes, ever since he refused to kill Claudius while his uncle prayed so as not to send him to heaven, this seems rather another condemnation of Gertrude than an act of filial devotion (V.ii.332). Though Hamlet does not personally kill his mother, his invective suggests that if Claudius is to follow her, she must already be on her way to hell. All of Hamlet's behavior towards Gertrude argues a disrespect of his mother.

This disrespect is echoed in his manner with Ophelia, his supposed beloved and the only woman of his own generation in the play. Though, as previously noted, Ophelia's love letters seem to show that at one point Hamlet offered her a passionate and romantic courtship, he is at best rude and at worst intentionally humiliating toward her throughout the play. Hamlet's first scene with her is not seen by the audience, only told from the perspective of the frightened Ophelia, who recounts his bedraggled appearance, "doublet all unbrac'd, / ... stockings foul'd, / ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle," and how distraught he appeared, "as if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (II.i.78-80, 83-84). Nothing in her recounting immediately suggests misogyny. In fact, Ophelia appears to be the first person Hamlet goes to after seeing the Ghost, which some might see as a sign that he is more fond of her than anyone else. On closer examination, however, this proves an inaccurate reading of the circumstances. In the previous scene on the battlements, after Hamlet has finished his rendezvous with the Ghost, he is most likely still fully dressed. It is a cold night in Denmark in the dead of winter (I.i). If Hamlet had been so undone, on the battlements, he would have frozen. Horatio, upon coming to Hamlet after the ghost interlude, makes no statements about Hamlet's appearance. Despite his previous concern that the ghost would drive Hamlet to madness, he simply asks Hamlet for the news (I.v.120). This indicates that Hamlet appears to be fine, at least physically. When Hamlet administers an oath to his liegemen to keep silent about his antic plans, he seems in full command of his faculties. He can articulate his intention to put on an antic disposition and has the presence of mind to explain that the falseness of his madness must remain a close secret. Horatio speaks of his "wild and whirling words," but when questioned, Hamlet can give a coherent answer that fits within his plan (I.v.139). Nothing anywhere in the play indicates that Hamlet has another run-in with the ghost before he goes to see Ophelia. Therefore, this shift in

his manner, from his self-control on the battlements to his dishabille in Ophelia's closet, instead implies that he has chosen Ophelia as the first person on whom to test his put-on madness. Since Polonius seems unconcerned about witnesses, it is safe to assume that Ophelia was alone in her closet when Hamlet showed up. If this is the case, this one-on-one meeting would have offered Hamlet the perfect opportunity to tell Ophelia about his plan. But he does not do so; instead, he puts on a mad show. This is not the act of a sincere lover; it is the choice of a man who does not consider the feelings of the woman he is tormenting.

Similarly, in the infamous nunnery sequence, Hamlet is verbally abusive to Ophelia (III.i.88-163). Even if he has figured out that she is a participant in the schemes of Claudius and Polonius, his barbs are personal and, judging by Ophelia's reaction, calculated to wound her as deeply as possible. She begins by trying to respond to his comments directly and politely: "Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?" (III.i.109-110). A few moments later, though, when she receives no sign that Hamlet even hears her, she turns to prayers, clearly worried about him, "O help him, you sweet heavens" (III.i.135). From this point in the play, Hamlet's stabs at Ophelia's dignity and his attempts to play mind-games with her become very public. He makes lewd references at the Players' show, in full view of the court and her father, clearly intending to emotionally destabilize and humiliate her. He makes reference to "country matters," or sex, and "puppets dallying" and lying "between maids' legs" (III.ii.115, 242, 117). It would be inappropriate for a virtuous woman to respond to these sallies, yet he persists. These sexual provocations of Ophelia do not advance Hamlet's goal of determining the guilt of the king; they are only casual attempts to embarrass a woman he claims to love, or, at best, calculating efforts to exploit her in order to establish his madness for others. After this traumatizing performance, his professions in Ophelia's grave to have loved her more than her

brother ever did seem insignificant and petty, intended less to actually honour Ophelia than to incense Laertes and cause a brawl (V.i.264-266). In light of Hamlet's other behaviour, this grand gesture in her grave is one final insult against his supposed love, ruining her funeral and the attendant rites of those who care enough to bury her. Hamlet's cruel and mean-spirited behavior towards Ophelia is very like his treatment of his mother, further emphasizing his misogynistic tyranny over the women in his life.

By making Horatio a woman, a production could mitigate some of this rampant misogyny. If Hamlet's best friend is a woman, all of Hamlet's statements about women as a gender are called into question and must be examined. For example, after seeing his mother and new king together at court, Hamlet hurls invective, including the blanket statement "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii.146). From his speech about friendship to Horatio later, in which the Prince refers to his friend as one "whose blood and judgment are...well commedled" and "not passion's slave," it becomes clear that he does not believe that Horatio is prey to that frailty (III.ii.69, 72). Hamlet's sweeping generalization would then plausibly refer specifically to Gertrude, whom he cannot bring to call "Mother." With a gender change to Horatio, the apparent misogyny in the line would be redirected at those individuals whom he perceives as having wronged him, rather than at the entire gender.⁵ In narrowing his ire to these specific women, Hamlet becomes a more sympathetic character since he does not bear hatred towards half of humanity.

At one point in the text, Hamlet actually refers to Horatio as a woman, seemingly derogatorily. When Horatio presses Hamlet not to accept Laertes's challenge, the Prince calls his

⁵ Other instances of Hamlet's chauvinism that would need to be addressed include his rant to Ophelia about honesty and beauty in III.i and the exchange "'Tis brief, my lord"/"As woman's love" at the Players' performance in III.ii (III.ii.148-149). Each piece of text must be assessed in order to explain it in the context of the specific production.

worry “such a kind of gaingiving/as would perhaps trouble a woman” (V.ii.211-212). If Horatio actually were a woman, this line becomes even more insulting, likening Horatio to the other women to whom Hamlet shows such scorn. The actor playing Hamlet has other options, however. He could make the line into an uneasy jest or the Prince lashing out because his best friend doubts his ability to win. In any case, it would be a testament to a female Horatio’s concern for him that instead of responding to the insult, she continues in her course to dissuade and save him. This exchange could once more demonstrate Horatio’s loyalty to Hamlet, far above what either Gertrude or Ophelia offer him, marking her as a different kind of woman than the ones provided by Shakespeare in the play.

Because Horatio’s sanity, loyalty, and narrative function would make the character such a potentially positive female force in the play, it makes sense to envision a production in which the character is made a woman. When making gender switches, some productions choose to cast female actors, but play the characters still male, in the tradition of operatic breeches roles, as well long standing theatrical traditions, such as Peter Pan being played by a woman. This type of cross-casting does not mandate any especial changes to the text or the manner of production, though it can be confusing for audience members if any part of the costuming or performance suggests gender ambiguity. However, if the character’s gender is altered, as well as the performer’s, the text must be examined for places where the gender change needs to show up in the language itself. Since the remainder of this article refers specifically to productions with a female Horatio, from this point on, the character will be referred to as female, with the appropriate feminine pronoun.

The first textual issue to consider is Horatio’s name. The knee-jerk reaction upon changing the gender of a character from male to female is to alter the name, generally from an

“o” ending to an “a” ending, as Julie Taymor does in her film version of *The Tempest*, making Helen Mirren’s Prospero a Prospera. Horatio could similarly be changed to Horatia. However, there is some feeling, particularly among younger audiences, that this change is purely cosmetic and serves to further distance the audience from the character, who is no longer called what they expect her to be called. Joanne Zipay, founder and artistic director of the Judith Shakespeare Company, states that feminizing the name of a gender-switched character is “very self-conscious,” and that by “changing it, ... you make people think about it” rather than simply accepting it as part of the play (Zipay). Feminizing the ending of the name points up the change in gender and may suggest that Horatio’s gender is the main fact that distinguishes her from other characters. However, the simpler solution is to retain Horatio, and consider it the character’s surname (i.e. Eleanor Horatio), where the mode of address is simply assumed to be in the male fashion of referring to all by their last names. For a woman in a man’s world, assuming a masculine form of address, such as professional athletes do, allows Horatio to fit in better. For purposes of this piece, the character name has been maintained as Horatio.

After Horatio’s name, pronouns are the most obvious and widespread example of a necessary text change. The adapter must effect a sweeping change of “he” to “she” and “him” to “her” in order to maintain the integrity of the production.

Then there are the masculine nouns. In act I scene i, Marcellus refers to himself and Horatio as “liegemen to the Dane” (I.i.16). This may require a change, though the editor may decide that liegemen is a gender-neutral term, like “mankind” or “actors.” In addition, “liegepersons” does not fit the meter of the line and may sound jarring in context. The adapter must keep in mind the gender of the character, the best choices for audience comprehension, and

metrical consistency. Each decision should be made individually, taking into account all factors. Some choices may also depend on the staging of the piece, a matter addressed later.

Hamlet often refers to Horatio specifically as “man” or “a man”(III.ii.71). Unfortunately, natural substitutes like “woman” and “person” are polysyllabic, making them less than ideal options; however, preserving “man” could imply that Hamlet cannot tell that Horatio is a woman, which may confuse the audience about whether Horatio is a woman or is simply being played by one. The editor may choose to insert “one” in place of “man,” as in “Horatio, thou art e’en as just a one” (III.ii.54). In this particular sequence, however, the previous dialogue is in prose, so the editor also has the option of using “woman” or “person.”⁶

The final necessary noun change comes in Hamlet’s death throes. When Horatio tries to finish off the poisoned wine, Hamlet entreats Horatio “As th’art a man,/give me the cup” (V.ii.347). Dropping the first part in addressing a female Horatio would strengthen “give me the cup,” making it a demand rather than a plea. However, if the original meaning is desired, “a man” may be changed to “human” or “a friend.”

Pursuit of metrical consistency may lead to new character choices. The entirety of Hamlet’s speech of close friendship to Horatio in III.ii is littered with possible metrical pitfalls. There is no good metrical alternative for “A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards/hast ta’en with equal thanks,” since the previous line uses “one,” besides which “a one” sounds rather clumsy (III.ii.67-68). Like the earlier “Sir, my good friend,” the best choice may be to incorporate a metrical silence, in this case repeating “one,” as in “[beat] One that Fortune’s buffets and rewards/hast ta’en with equal thanks” (III.ii.67-68). In searching for a metrical

⁶ The following lines return to verse. As there may be an emotional or character-driven reason that Hamlet speaks to Horatio in verse and to the Players, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in prose, the editor must consider this when making changes.

equivalent, one may uncover new meanings for the lines: barely four lines later, Hamlet's use of "man" and Horatio's changed gender may combine for a new character choice for Hamlet.

Hamlet says "Give me that man/That is not Passion's slave, and I will wear him/In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,/as I do thee" (III.ii.71-74). In a traditionally gendered production, this is a sweeping rhetorical statement, since Hamlet already has that man in Horatio. In a production where Horatio is female, the line takes on the meaning that if Hamlet could find such a man, he would be best friends with him, but there is no such man because these qualities are unique in Horatio, a woman.

A further textual concern to address is the use of vocatives like "sir." This formal mode of address presents a thorny problem for the adapter. The female correlative might be "ma'am," but in modern parlance "ma'am" implies an age difference between the speaker and the spoken to that does not suit Hamlet's relationship with Horatio. One might consider changing "sir" to "lady." However, "lady" has an extra syllable and therefore presents a metrical problem. In some circumstances, such as "sir, my good friend, I'll change that name with you," a gender-neutral "you" might be substituted, the line might be cut entirely, or the "sir" deleted for a metrical beat of silence to maintain the verse (I.ii.163).

All of the previous discussion has dealt with the textual effects of a female Horatio. None of this addresses the physical possibilities inherent in a woman onstage rather than a man. Some of the implications of Horatio being female will only become apparent in production, when there is an actual female body where there would otherwise have been a male one.

Depending on the era in which the production is set and the choices of the director and costume designer, Horatio may be more or less obviously female in her attire. According to Julie Siefkes's unpublished 1996 BFA acting thesis, in which she discusses her own portrayal of

Horatio, the costume designer chose to keep her female Horatio fairly masculine in dress, employing military styling and pants, as well as the actress's own short hair (Siefkes Appendix). This production at the University of Virginia chose to keep the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio purely platonic and the masculine design of her costume encouraged the audience not to view Horatio as a potential partner for Hamlet. Though Siefkes does not discuss the audience's response to her somewhat androgynous Horatio, a director would need to consider whether the audience will understand that the character is female, rather than a woman playing a man. In any period prior to the 1920s, a woman in pants onstage implies either an unnatural woman character, as in Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, a woman disguised as a man, such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, or a woman playing a male character, like Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet. These mores change as one approaches the 20th century and women on the street begin wearing trousers in everyday life⁷, but the director and designer must consider when making costuming changes whether they wish to risk the audience doubting Horatio's gender, particularly in light of the patriarchal world of the play.

Conversely, by costuming Horatio in a more obviously feminine style, the production has the opportunity to subvert some widespread cultural perceptions of Hamlet himself. As pointed out by Catherine Belsey in her essay "Was Hamlet a Man or a Woman?," numerous artists, in portraying the tragic Prince beside his closest friend, have chosen a more effeminate style for Hamlet in contrast to Horatio's bluff manliness (Belsey 145). In a cross-cast production, with Horatio no longer representing this obvious masculinity, the director may choose to play up the more masculine-coded behaviours in Hamlet himself. Belsey ascribes Hamlet's lack of decisive action in the play to a femininity in his character (146). A female Horatio would make Hamlet the contrastingly masculine force in their relationship. Each decision the production team

⁷ Actress Katherine Hepburn is often seen in casual photographs in trousers and pantsuits (Hepburn).

chooses to make will affect the overall message of the play and it is vitally important that the audience understand each piece of the story in its new context so that they remain on the same page as the production.

The male military society depicted in *Hamlet* also requires the production team to put extra thought into the opening scenes of the play, when Horatio is out on the frosty battlements of Elsinore, keeping watch with the King's guardsmen. Although Horatio is a woman and an outsider, her presence must be accepted by the guardsmen as natural. It transpires that Marcellus has expressly invited her to keep the watch since she does not believe their claims of having seen a ghost (I.i.29). The guardsmen are familiar with Horatio, know where to find her, and are comfortable approaching her with their story. A female Horatio would pose an obvious challenge for the production team: in almost any historical period other than the modern age, this easy-going social interaction between military men and a civilian woman would rarely occur. The director and dramaturg would need to figure out how to justify Marcellus's choice within the context of the production. Marcellus may seek her assistance because she is a close confidant of the Prince and her presence is the next best thing to Hamlet's own. Her knowledge of philosophy may also serve as Marcellus's reasoning. The guardsmen are facing something beyond their comprehension and so they look to someone with knowledge greater than their own, Horatio. As soon as the ghost appears, both Marcellus and Barnardo entreat Horatio to deal with it. This action suggests that the men trust Horatio and her scholar's mind to confront something that they themselves fear.

Horatio herself seems to take on the task of facing the ghost with no qualms. While Ophelia, confronted with a bedraggled Hamlet, is terrified and runs to her father, Horatio, faced with the spectre of the recently dead king of Denmark, is cool and collected, demanding that the

apparition speak. This calm, non-hysterical reaction to danger is only one of the ways in which Horatio does not fit the play's profile of a stereotypical woman. Though she is, as Hamlet points out, one of "the poor," not a member of the nobility, Horatio is secure enough in herself to make demands on the Prince of Denmark (III.ii.58). When Hamlet, all a-lather, prepares to follow an apparition of unknown origin and intent, Horatio does not plead or entreat him to reconsider. She gives him a command: "Be ruled, you shall not go" (I.iv.81). Though Hamlet does not heed it, the attempt shows that Horatio possesses a spine of steel in direct contrast to the other ladies of the play.

Given the constraints of the opening sequence of the play, a winter midnight outdoors in Northern Europe, it may be possible for the director to surprise the audience with Horatio's gender in I.ii. Even a lady might be excused for wearing heavy masculine outerwear on the battlements of Elsinore in the middle of the night, perhaps even a large hat that might camouflage her gender. Since she is not a regular member of the watch, her gear could plausibly be borrowed and not tailored to her actual measurements. Thus, in the next scene, when she and her compatriots of the watch find Hamlet the following morning, Hamlet may be forgiven for not immediately recognizing his best friend (or even potentially his lover) because she is camouflaged by her watch gear. As she begins to shed the outer layers, revealing more feminine garb and her true form, the line "Horatio, or I do forget myself" would make sense, given that Hamlet knows that Horatio was in Elsinore, having seen her at both the funeral and the wedding (I.ii.161). By moving the "reveal" forward a scene, the production would give a modern audience the opportunity to become accustomed to the language and style of a 16th-century work and the specific conceit of the production before throwing them the curve of a gender-switched main character.

Horatio's attendance at the University of Wittenberg is another problem that would come from the gender switch. Before the 20th century, there were few or no coeducational universities, so Hamlet and Horatio's relationship as schoolmates will be problematic. One solution would be to have Horatio cross-dress to attend university. As Charles Johnson's account shows, there are records from as early as the mid-17th century of women dressing convincingly as men in order to move outside of their proscribed female sphere, as in the case of female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read (Johnson 2-4). Mary Read shared a military tent with her future husband for some time during her army service with no one the wiser. It is plausible that Horatio might be leading this type of double life as well.

These and other effects will of course depend on the way the team chooses to address Horatio and Hamlet's relationship. There is a tendency amongst people in modern Western society to assume a sexual relationship whenever a woman and a man are close friends, as expressed in the famous line from *When Harry Met Sally*: "Women and men can't be friends" (Reiner). Furthermore, many 20th-century productions of *Hamlet* have emphasized its sexual aspects. In the film adaptations by Svend Gade (1920), Laurence Olivier (1948), and Franco Zeffirelli (1990), each director brought an element of sexuality to the text influenced, as they appear to have been, by Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex. As a result of these films, James Simmons quite rightly points out that "most of us now see *Hamlet* as a drama in which sexual issues are predominant" (Simmons 111). Because of this widespread public perception of *Hamlet* as a play about sex and sexuality, Horatio's transformation into a woman will subject the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio to sexual scrutiny.

Horatio and Hamlet seem to be closer emotionally than any other characters in the play. Hamlet trusts Horatio, lets her in on his plans, and demands her presence repeatedly. As

previously noted, Horatio is present in almost every major Hamlet scene in the play. The most intimate scene in their relationship is act III, scene ii, when Hamlet bares his soul to his dearest friend. The language he uses seems more impassioned and sincere than in his love letter to Ophelia. In his 1994 paper in *College Literature*, Imtiaz Habib offers up an alternate reading to the love letter that suggests, through interpretations of the word “doubt,” that the poem Hamlet writes to Ophelia actually intends to cast doubt on his love of her, rather than to reinforce it. Habib points out that in the first two lines of the poem, “Doubt thou the stars are fire,/Doubt thou the sun doth move,” the word doubt is used to mean suspect or barely believe (II.ii.115-116, Habib 20). According to this meaning of doubt, Hamlet’s injunction to “Doubt truth to be a liar,” should be read as ‘suspect that truth is a liar’, that is, that Hamlet might be lying to Ophelia. Continuing in this vein, the next section of the letter—“Oh dear Ophelia I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to/reckon my groans”—takes on a new tone (II.ii.119-120). Though it may be seen as romantic in the Byronic mode of suffering for the sake of love, and Shakespeare himself notes that “the course of true love never did run smooth,” from a practical perspective, being literally sick for love is hardly a thing to be desired (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* I.i.134). In either case, Hamlet’s expressions of feeling to Ophelia are infused with imagery of illness and possible deception. By comparison, Hamlet’s words to Horatio are firm, clear, and not open to question: “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,/and could of men distinguish her election,/Sh’ath seal’d thee for herself” (III.ii.63-65). In modern parlance, Hamlet is calling Horatio his soul-mate, a designation generally used to convey romantic attachment. The language suggests that his affection for Horatio is more mature, influenced by mutual respect and common interests, than the heady flash of his relationship with Ophelia. He continues on to say that he carries Horatio in his “heart of heart,” which certainly sounds like a profession of love.

This scene appears to contain one of, if not the only honest and rational expression of emotion for another person that Hamlet is given, and the full force of his affection is directed at Horatio. Horatio furthers the apparent connection between the two characters by calling Hamlet “sweet lord” and “my dear lord,” terms of endearment that may easily be interpreted as more than mere flattery (III.ii.53, 56).

Furthermore, Hamlet’s use of straightforward verse with Horatio contrasts sharply with his preference for highly figurative prose with Ophelia. All of Hamlet’s conversations with Ophelia are in prose and characterized by heavy use of metaphor, as in the nunnery scene or at the Players’ performance (III.i, III.ii). For example, Hamlet speaks to Ophelia in a muddle of churches and hobby-horses that does not make much sense: “But by’r lady a must build churches then, or else shall a suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is ‘For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot’” (III.ii.130-133). All of his comments contain ambiguities, puns, and innuendo calculated to confuse. In order to understand him, Ophelia is forced to decode Hamlet’s language. In contrast, Hamlet’s interactions with Horatio are almost entirely in verse. He explains his plan for the king and the players fully in III.ii and straightforwardly tells Horatio to watch his uncle’s responses (III.ii.75-87). There is no room for misinterpretation there. He offers Horatio the respect of an equal, rather than attempting to play with her mind. By keeping Horatio apprised of his schemes, rather than tangling her in his web, Hamlet obviously shows more caring towards her than he ever does towards Ophelia.

Although Horatio and Ophelia rarely interact directly, the additional dimension of a romantic relationship between Hamlet and Horatio will affect what little contact there is between Horatio and Ophelia. Both women are present at the Players’ performance, though they do not speak to each other. It would be up to the actors and the director to determine whether either

woman is aware of the other's connection to Hamlet and, if so, what form that knowledge takes. The only explicit interaction between the two characters occurs after Ophelia has gone mad, when she comes before Queen Gertrude, who is being waited upon by Horatio. Horatio encourages the reluctant queen to see Ophelia and, when Ophelia runs out, Horatio is tasked with watching her. Though Ophelia is mad, there is still a strong impression in her words that she remembers everything that has happened to her, as shown by her appropriate choice of flowers for each person in the room (IV.v.173-183). If she is similarly aware of Hamlet's relationship with Horatio, sending the other woman after her might serve only to exacerbate her already frayed emotions. If Horatio is aware of Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia, and surely she must be, since Hamlet shares all other information with her, Horatio might relish her only opportunity to be alone with Ophelia. When Ophelia and Horatio return to the Queen's receiving room, Ophelia is in even higher dudgeon, madder than she had appeared before. What happens between Horatio and Ophelia is unknown, but since their feelings for Hamlet are similar, it could be a jealous confrontation between the rivals.

Making Horatio a woman actually makes the whole of IV.v make more sense from a societal perspective. It is odd that Gertrude would be depicted spending time alone with a young man of common birth, as she is at the beginning of the scene as written. If Horatio were a woman and acting as a lady-in-waiting to the Queen while in Elsinore, she would have a legitimate reason to be present and to have the ear of the queen. This change seems minor in the grand scheme of the plot; however, it adds a small amount of logic to a situation that was previously troubling to theatre practitioners (Zipay).

Making Horatio a woman may also allow her to be present in more scenes than she is officially in textually. In II.ii, an attendant enters with Claudius, Gertrude, and Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern. If that attendant is Horatio, she has the opportunity to observe the King's plan for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and pass the information on to Hamlet when she delivers them to him, as the attendant is instructed to do. If Horatio served as the attendant in this scene, she could signal to Hamlet that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are at Elsinore at the behest of the King and Queen, providing a rational explanation for Hamlet's immediate paranoid assumption that they are tools of Claudius. As a result, Hamlet would appear less unstable and more sane in this scene. Since Horatio is charged at the end of the play with telling Hamlet's story, it makes sense for her to be present for as much of it as possible, so that she can tell the full story.

If the choice were made to depict Hamlet and Horatio as romantically involved, a number of scenes would change their meanings. Laertes and Polonius, for example, would appear wise, rather than controlling and oppressive, in cautioning Ophelia to be wary of Hamlet's affections since he is involved with another woman. Hamlet's decision to try out his madness on Ophelia could look like a calculated attempt to break her attachment to him. The nunnery scene would appear to be a continuation of this attempt, though it is clear that Hamlet's methods are not very effective as Ophelia remains emotionally attached. His behavior at the Players' performance, which would seem to indicate a preference for Ophelia over Horatio, could then serve two simultaneous purposes. First, if Hamlet and Horatio were to sit together, Horatio would not have a unique perspective on the king, which Hamlet needs for this stage of his plan. In order to move his scheme forward, Hamlet needs to sit somewhere apart from Horatio. Second, given Hamlet's obvious distrust of anyone connected to Elsinore and the corruption therein, it would make sense for Hamlet not to want to have his name linked to Horatio's, both to keep attention away from her and to prevent his enemies from realizing that they can use her as leverage against him.

It is curious that when he seeks someone to spy on Hamlet and possibly influence him, Claudius chooses to send for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are not at Elsinore, rather than applying to Horatio, who is present already. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Claudius may select Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply because he knows them better or has known them longer. Given Hamlet's characterization of Horatio as a university acquaintance, a "fellow student" rather than a boyhood companion, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are presumably friends of longer standing (I.ii.167). As Horatio's nationality is unclear, Claudius might pick Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because, as native Danes, they have more of an obligation to support him as ruler of Denmark. The final reason Claudius might decide to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rather than Horatio is simply that he is aware that Horatio is too loyal to Hamlet to agree to his request. All these reasons are in the text as written. Beyond the purely textual, however, additional explanations would appear if Horatio were a woman. If Claudius even suspects a relationship beyond friendship between Hamlet and Horatio, he would be doubly unlikely to ask one to betray the other. If Horatio were female, Claudius would have an additional incentive for ignoring her presence and reaching out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: they are male. The culture of Elsinore is a martial one, heavily skewed to favour males. In such a society, it is entirely plausible that Claudius would dismiss the woman who is constantly in his stepson's company, and turn instead to male friends whom Hamlet has not seen in some time. Gertrude tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that she is sure "two men there is not living/To whom [Hamlet] more adheres" (II.ii.20-21). While this may be read as a gender-neutral word, meaning "people," under the specifications of this production, it could also be seen as Gertrude's acknowledgement that while Hamlet is very fond of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they are the *men* to whom he is closest, but there is a woman who is closer still.

By making Horatio female, the production offers a woman with positive qualities that contrast with the negative qualities of Ophelia and Gertrude. Where Ophelia is terrified by Hamlet in disarray in her chambers in act II, scene i, Horatio stands up calmly to the ghost of a dead king (II.i.75-100, I.i.45-54). Hamlet describes Horatio as “not passion’s slave,” but in his tirade against Gertrude he marks her, as a woman, as powerless before her emotions and lusts (III.ii.72, III.iv.65-94) In an article from *Literature Film Quarterly*, Sharon R. Yang compares the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio to that of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully on the cult hit television show *The X-Files*. Hamlet and Mulder are both dedicated and committed men, passionately attached to their respective causes, but their wild behavior and refusal to adhere to the norms of their particular societies causes people to mistrust them and write off their claims as flights of fancy. Each man needs a balancing force, a lens through which the world may view them and with which each man can stabilize himself in an increasingly unbalanced situation. Horatio shares many characteristics with Mulder’s foil, Dr. Dana Scully. Both characters are rational in the face of their partners’ passion, believers in scholarship over faith—the biological sciences for Scully, philosophy for Horatio—and skeptics who are ultimately won over to their compatriots’ causes. Because of their skepticism at the beginning, their conversions to their partners’ causes carry that much more weight. One of the things that makes *The X-Files* so popular with female audiences is that the qualities ascribed to Scully—rationality, dedication to facts, and skepticism—are the opposite of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to women. Making Horatio female could achieve some of the same subversive effect in a production of *Hamlet*.

A female Horatio can make a feminist statement about history and about Shakespeare; however, more important than such ideological concerns is insuring that the choice to cross-cast

is correct for the play and the production (Zipay). In casting Horatio as a woman, a company has the opportunity to change an audience's perceptions of the play. Hamlet himself changes from being completely misogynistic to being more rationally angry at his circumstances and the particular women involved. Overall, the play would also present a more modern view of femininity, by presenting, through Horatio, a female character who is not trapped or diminished by the society in which she lives. As the foregoing shows, such a gender-switch could be accomplished without too much difficulty, offering itself as a ideal choice for the feminist dramaturg interested in making a timely gendered difference to Shakespeare's most famous play.

Bibliography

- Belsey, Catherine. "'Was Hamlet a Man or a Woman?': The Prince in the Graveyard 1800-1920." *Hamlet: New Critical Essays*. By Arthur F. Kinney. New York: Routledge, 2002. 135-58.
- Dean, Pamela. *Tam Lin*. New York: Firebird, 2006.
- De-yan, Guo. "Hamlet's Femininity." *Canadian Social Science* 5.5 (2009): 89-95. *JSTOR*.
- Farrison, W. Edward. "Horatio's Report to Hamlet." *Modern Language Notes* 72.6 (1957): 406-08. *JSTOR*.
- Fraimow, Rebecca. BA Theatre: Stanford University, Costumer. Personal interview. 5 Oct. 2010.
- Habib, Imtiaz. "'Never Doubt I Love': Misreading Hamlet." *College Literature* 21.2 (1994): 19-32. *EBSCO*.
- Hepburn, Katherine. *Me: Stories of My Life*. Knopf, 1991.
- Hunt, Margaret. "'The Great Danger She Had Reason to Believe She Was In'." *Women and History: Voices of Early Modern England*. Toronto : Coach House Press. 1995 81-102
- Jenstad, Janelle. "History of Editing: The New Bibliography." *Editing Shakespeare*. University of Victoria, Victoria, BC. 27 Jan. 2011.
- Johnson, Capt. Charles. *A General History of... the Pyrates*. 1724
- O'Donnell, Sydney C., convener. "Dramaturgs and Feminism." *Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas 2010*, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta.
- Schoff, Francis G. "Horatio: A Shakespearian Confidant". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 7.1 (1956): 53-57. *JSTOR*.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. Harold F. Brooks. London: Thomson Learning, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1982.
- Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. Keir Elam. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008.
- Siefkes, Julie D. "Flights of Angels: Horatio and Lady." BFA Thesis. University of Virginia, 1996.
- Simmons, James R. "'In the Rank Sweat of an Enseamed Bed': Sexual Aberration and the Paradigmatic Screen 'Hamlets.'" *Literature Film Quarterly* 25.2 (1997): 111-18. *EBSCO*.

Simpson, Percy. "Horatio and the Ghost in 'Hamlet.' A Side-Note on the Current Controversy."
The Modern Language Review 13.3 (1918): 321-22. *JSTOR*.

Smith, Jessica. BA Theatre: Northern Kentucky University, Costumer : *La Rêve*. Personal
interview. 11 Sept. 2010.

Yang, Sharon R. "The Truth Is Out There in Elsinore: Mulder and Scully as Hamlet and
Horatio." *Literature Film Quarterly* 32.2 (2004): 97-107. *EBSCO*.

Zipay, Joanne. Founder and Artistic Director, Judith Shakespeare Company. Personal interview.
28 January 2011.