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Bernhardt and Eva Le Gallienne as
Hamlet

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“Frailty thy Name is Woman:”
Sarah Bernhardt and Eva Le Gallienne as Hamlet

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the issues of gender in the performances of Hamlet by Sarah Bernhardt and Eva Le Gallienne. I analyze the cultural contexts for their performances as it relates to their homosexuality both on and off stage. I place these women and their time periods in conversation with each other and then reflect this conversation onto the University of Puget Sound’s 2015 mainstage production of *Hamlet* starring Cassie Jo Fastabend as the titular princess.

Outline:

- A. Introduction and Thesis:
 - a. These women were drawn to the seminal role of Hamlet because of their intense ambition and personal divergence from gender and sexual norms.
- B. *Hamlet*: cultural background and relevance
- C. Sarah Bernhardt and *Hamlet*
- D. Sarah Bernhardt and sexuality
 - a. Exoticized Judaism
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- E. Eva Le Gallienne
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- G. Eva Le Gallienne as Hamlet
- H. Cassie Fastabend as Hamlet
- I. Bernhardt and Le Gallienne

International symbolic shorthand for Shakespeare is of a man in doublet and tights holding a skull, often with the misquotation “Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well,” or, perhaps even more erroneously “To be or not to be.” *Hamlet* is almost universally required reading material for English speaking high school students, so each person who comes to the play has a very specific idea of what and who Hamlet is. *Hamlet* is iconic and seminal. When *Hamlet* is produced, the director must negotiate the reality that every person in the audience has a notion of

what *Hamlet* is and who Hamlet has to be. There can never be a Hamlet or a *Hamlet* that can please all audience members because of these preconceived notions of delivery, appearance, style, tone, and gender. Choosing an actor for the role of Hamlet is difficult. It is the most important decision to be made about the production, and can rarely be done through a traditional audition-based casting process. To be able to do *Hamlet* the production must have “the actor who’s ready, the actress at whom the blood quickens... this is an unforgiving contest, [so] he has to strike exceptional fire or not do it at all... the interesting player is thus taken to the part like match to the touch paper: you retreat and wait for the bang.”¹ However, there are also many Hamlets that come an from the actor feeling ready for the role and creating the opportunity to play it. Although Hamlets that look more like the blonde, middle aged Laurence Olivier are traditional, it is a gauntlet that many revered female performers have run as well. Both Sarah Bernhardt and Eva Le Gallienne each directed their own productions of *Hamlet*, serving their productions not only as a figurehead, but as a true leader. Women in strong leadership positions was highly unusual for most areas of work in the late 19th and early 20th century, but not unusual for artistic professions. Women such as Le Gallienne and Bernhardt were predisposed for this laborious work of analysis and production. **These women were drawn to the seminal role of Hamlet because of their intense ambition and personal divergence from gender and sexual norms. A cross dressed performance invites a new theoretical stance on classic text, and by casting themselves in this part, Bernhardt and Le Gallienne invited audiences and critics alike to view them with a new seriousness as dramatists as well as performers.**

¹ Michael Pennington, *Hamlet: A User's Guide*, (London: Nick Hern Books), 1996.

The role of Hamlet was originally written for Richard Burbage, a lead actor in Shakespeare's acting company, sometime between 1599 and 1602. Burbage was considered a great actor and was in his mid-late career when he played the role of the young Hamlet. In fact, early editions of the play refer to Hamlet in the gravedigger scene as being nineteen years old. Richard Burbage, about forty years old, was too old to read as the teenaged Hamlet, so the line was rewritten to refer to him as thirty. This change created tension around the role, opening questions without answers. A read of *Hamlet* with a mature man in the part is ill-suited to the intent of the original play in which we witness a young person doubting his place in his family and society as all his previously held expectations and beliefs of self are pulled into question. Hamlet's laborious ponderings would suggest a weak character in a man of full or late adulthood. Yet Hamlet's crisis of the mind and identity would seem reasonable for a very young adult. However, there is an enduring perception that only men at the peak of their careers and acting abilities (typically their mid thirties or early forties) are able to achieve the emotional truth needed to play the part, though non traditional and youthful casting better serve the story.

Hamlet is, at its core, the story of a young person who is unable to cope with grief and anger. Hamlet is eventually encouraged by the ghost of his father to avenge his murder. The text is beautiful and flexible and many meanings can be applied to it. Laurence Olivier's Oedipal interpretation, enhanced by the fact that although he was forty-one when he played the Prince, the actress playing Gertrude, Eileen Herlie, was visibly ten years younger than Olivier. That Hamlet's anguish comes from an Oedipal obsession with his mother was not intended by the text, but can be applied and still tell the story. Each skilled artist that approaches the play wrings new truths out of it. *Hamlet* has sustained its classic excellence because there are as many Hamlets as

there are performers to play him. It is unclear when *Hamlet* became the gauntlet for all fearless, established performers to run. With over over one thousand five hundred lines, Hamlet is the wordiest character in the Shakespearian cannon. He speaks at least three times more words than any other character in his play. The next wordiest is *Othello's* Iago with a little over 1000 lines, whereas other Shakesperian leads average between 300-600 lines. Perhaps it is the quantitative size of the part that has made it a "star" vehicle, or perhaps it is the intense emotional journey, or perhaps even because Hamlet is so specific yet so general that any excellent actor at the top of their craft could play the part.

Women did not perform on professional London stages, so all female roles written by Shakespeare were intended to be played by pre-pubescent boys. In 1642 all public performance and entertainment was banned in England during the puritanical rule until 1660. When Charles II was crowned king he created a new series of patents for theatre, legalizing it again in 1660. In 1662 a revision of these theatre patents declared that "forasmuch as many plays formerly acted do conteine severall prophane [sic], obscene and scurrilous passages, and the women's parts therein have been acted by men in the habit of women, at which some have taken offense...we doe likewise permit and give leave that all the women's parts to be acted in either of the said two companies may be performed by women..."² These two patented theaters were the rival King's Company and Duke's Company. Eventually, women were permitted on all English stages, and female characters could legally only be played by women, male cross dressing performances

² D. Thomas and A. Hare, *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660-1799, Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11-12.

were reserved for only broadly comedic parts.³ Women did not play men's parts in reputable theaters. The first female performer to professionally do Shakespeare was an unnamed woman as Desdemona in *Othello* at the Cockpit Theatre in December of 1660.

The first woman recorded playing Hamlet professionally was Fanny Furnival in Dublin in 1741. Women playing "breeches roles," or male characters, were very popular in the 18th century, and the surge of women playing Hamlet at this time was largely due to that change in popular taste and a desire for novelty on stage.⁴ The first popular performer to play the part was Sarah Siddons in 1776. Breeches roles were considered provocative and risqué, and gave Siddons an ill reputation for adopting the male persona of Hamlet.⁵ However, Siddons went on to play the role of Hamlet nine times over the next thirty years. It was a hallmark of her career, adding depth and weight to her accomplishments, as well as titillating scandal that allowed her successes to have heritage as other actresses pick up the mantle she threw down.

³ Michael Dobson, "Improving on the Original: Actresses and Adaptations," *The Oxford Illustrated History of Shakespeare on Stage*, Eds. Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 48.

⁴ Theresa D. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*, (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2010) 139.

⁵ Russ McDonald, *Look to the Lady: Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judy Dench on the Shakespearian Stage*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). 46.



Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet

Sarah Bernhardt was considered the greatest actress of her generation. She was the first “personality” actress—as famous for her onstage work as well as her offstage life. She was a great diva—la Grande Dame of the French theatre. Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* rose out of late career passion, excitement and attention seeking. Bernhardt was in the first generation of international superstars. Predating the Chekovian and Stanislavskian ideals of realism, Bernhardt was of the school of the presentational performer. Presentational performers are less concerned about living truthfully in the moment, but rather exploring and presenting emotive states created by the text and given circumstances. French methods of performance are vastly different. Eva Le Gallienne, who grew up in Paris, performed the title character in *Jeanne de Arc* in French with a Parisian company. Le Gallienne noted that in their performance, “the tempo is faster, more staccato; there are very few pauses; the gestures are more exaggerated, more vivid—in fact, the whole effect is

more flamboyantly dramatic.”⁶ This is a dramatically different style from the Stanislavski philosophy of acting steeped in realism. The Stanislavski Method that was become popular in the early 20th century and was universal by the middle of the 20th century. Sarah Bernhardt represented the last generation of the great presentational, recitative performers. Some of Bernhardt’s mid and late career performances were recorded as very early audio recordings. However the quality of these recordings are insufficient to capture what first-hand observers described as the deep beauty of Bernhardt’s voice.⁷ A recording of Bernhardt performing *Phedre* in 1910 sounds high pitched and quavering, offering only a suggestion of emotion.⁸ It appears to be only a shadow of the capability of this great performer. The recording does give the listener an impression of her delivery style—fast, clipped and passionate, although it is devoid of the celestial beauty that Bernhardt purportedly possessed. Still, the recordings still have a sense of endowing the space with meaning

Bernhardt regularly rejected convention and frequently played male roles in addition to female ones. A prime example of the 19th century actor-manager model, Bernhardt owned her theatre, served as executive producer, director, and lead actress on all productions she undertook after the assumption of the Théâtre de la Renaissance in 1893, before converting the Théâtre des Nations on the Place du Châtelet to the eponymous Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt in 1899. Bernhardt was not afraid of attacking such controversial as Shylock in *Merchant of Venice* in 1880. As one of the few high profile European Jews in theatre, this was a very personal project to her—she had

⁶ Eva Le Gallienne, *At 33* (New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934), 176-177.

⁷ **Tony Howard**, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in*

⁸ Sarah Bernhardt, "Sarah Bernhardt Dans L'Aiglon D'Edmond Rostand 1910," YouTube, December 7, 2010. Accessed May 11, 2015.

to convincingly and sympathetically portray the Jewish character of Shylock to a largely anti-Semitic and chauvinistic audience.⁹ Even the text of *Merchant of Venice* was in a transitional period. It had originally been written as a comedy, with Shylock as a greedy, bumbling old miser, similar to Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Today, *Merchant of Venice* is always played as a drama, with Shylock as a sympathetic character. To produce the play with the original intent would be deeply anti-semitic to the modern sensibility. However, in the late 19th century, a dramatic rather than comedic interpretation was not the norm. Bernhardt's Shylock was a sympathetic portrayal of a Jewish character played in a country and in an era rife with anti-semitism.¹⁰ She was not afraid of making bold choices, and the choices that she made resonated though Western popular culture.

Bernhardt was not the first woman to play *Hamlet*; great actresses had been playing the title role for at least a hundred and fifty years with Charlotte Chark in the mid 18th century being one of the first famous ones. Bernhardt's *Hamlet* has become the epitomized female *Hamlet* because of her international celebrity status. The first French woman to play *Hamlet* was Madame Judith in 1867, almost thirty years before Bernhardt. Bernhardt saw Madame Judith play the part and declared to Judith afterwards that "that it was quite impossible for a woman to act *Hamlet*." Madame Judith took it well and suggested that "this [notion of impossibility was] why [Bernhardt] interpreted him herself several years later."¹¹ Bernhardt was hotheaded and ambitious and it is entirely plausible that she was drawn to this part because she saw it as the

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¹⁰ Treva Rose Tumbleson, *Three Female Hamlets: Charlotte Cushman, Sarah Bernhardt, and Eva le Gallinne*, University of Oregon: 1981, 200.

¹¹ Madame Judith, translation by Eveleigh Nash, *My Autobiography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913) 314.

ultimate challenge for her acting ability to play a part completely and fully against type, an achievement that she perceived as impossible. She had not apparently seen a woman acting the role to suit her taste. The level of difficulty in performing this most demanding role with the additional challenge of playing a convincing male persona piqued her interest. There were no women on record between Madame Judith's performance of Hamlet and Bernhardt's announcement in 1898 to play the part, but once Bernhardt announced her intent, several other women immediately preceded her in an attempt to profit from Bernhardt's publicity and popularity.¹² Because Bernhardt was such a celebrity, her proclamation that she would play the Danish prince piqued the interest of audience members who were willing to see these lesser actors perform the role.

Producing at the peak of the great actor-manager system, Sarah Bernhardt was leading actor as well as the director in her own theatre. Bernhardt the director was the most frequent collaborator of Bernhardt the actor. In fact, she directed herself in the majority of her performances throughout her career. This was common for male performers at the time, but was considerably less common for women. Bernhardt performed the combined roles deftly. Dame Ellen Terry commented that "Sarah Bernhardt showed herself the equal of any man as manager. Her productions were always beautiful; she chose her company with discretion, and saw to every detail of the stage management."¹³ Bernhardt was heralded as the complete theatre artist, but her commitment to the high quality of her projects led her to be a micromanager. She was a

¹²Mlle. Dudlay of the Comedie Francaise essayed Hamlet on tour in March of 1898, and Madame Derigay, an actress with the Parisian company Theatre les Bouffes du Nord. **Tumbleson**, 197.

¹³ Ellen, Terry. "The Glory of Sarah Bernhardt." *John O' London's Weekley*. January 14, 1928. Cited in Tumbleson, 205.

monolithic leader and participant in production, and it is not without good cause that this production of *Hamlet* is fully attributed to Bernhardt.

In 1897, Bernhardt commissioned a new French translation of *Hamlet*, the most accurate, faithful, and understandable to date. It was written in prose by Marcel Schwob and Eugene Morand. In 1899, she bought the Theatre de Nations and converted it into the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt and opened *Hamlet* as its inaugural production on May 20 of that year. Bernhardt's *Hamlet* was a youth of twenty-two in direct conversation with and contradiction to the aging, portly *Hamlets* then dominating the European stage. Bernhardt remarked, mockingly: "[these actors] want to play *Hamlet* when their appearance is more suitable to *King Lear*."¹⁴ The tradition was to play *Hamlet* "as a melancholy professor"¹⁵ to justify the older performers in the part, rather than the active young prince disillusioned by the glamour of his family and station. Bernhardt played *Hamlet* as a "volatile, impulsive and irrepressible"¹⁶ youth of twenty-two. This was a reasonable choice based on her physical instrument. However talented, it is more convincing for a woman to play a male youth than a male adult, just as young boys could be physically convincing playing all female parts in Elizabethan era theatre. Bernhardt created a fresh production of *Hamlet*, enhanced and imbued with original meaning. Bernhardt's physical attributes, combined with her seasoned dramatic ability allowed her to present the very young and tormented soul of *Hamlet*. Bernhardt's dramaturgical mind deeply developed the character through accurate and textually supported interpretation.

¹⁴ Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, 142

¹⁵ Howard, 100

¹⁶ Reviews of Bernhardt's *Hamlet*, June 12, 1899. *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*. Cited in Howard, 102.

Bernhardt's Hamlet was wholly masculine. He was a bulwark of strength and reason against Claudius and an equal match in masculinity for Laertes in their final death scene. "Hamlet does not kill the king because he is vacillating and weak, but because he is firm and logical," his scene with his mother "was a course scene, terrifying in its truth and savagery."¹⁷ Bernhardt's intensity was formed to create more masculinity in the air performance. Her firmness was driven by the text. Bernhardt's dramaturgical analysis is deft—each decision she made was with the intention of revealing new dynamics and colors in the text while maintaining the masculine identity of both the play and character.

The role of Ophelia was directed and played as the apex of femininity to compliment and enhance Bernhardt's intentionally masculine Hamlet. Ophelia was played by ingenue actress Marthe Mellot, blonde, fair, and graceful, with "girlish charm" and "submissive grace."¹⁸ Ophelia's funeral sequence was a morbid and opulent feminized spectacle. "Behind a great cross, hooded priests bore Ophelia shoulder-high on a floral bier; young women scattered blossoms on her, she held a flower."¹⁹ The death of Hamlet mirrored this moment, "[he] died standing, falling back into the arms of Horatio...her body turned instantly rigid and heavy as she sank back and was lowered as if from the cross. Hamlet was lifted onto a shield and was carried off through an arch of weapons."²⁰ But it was a crown that was placed on Hamlet's body, not a flower.

Bernhardt's *Hamlet* attempted to cast off anything feminine about the middle aged actress, and

¹⁷ Bernhardt, Daily Telegraph. Cited in Tony Howard, 107

¹⁸ Zoe Norris, "Madam Bernhardt's Hamlet," *Literature* (17 June 1899), cited in Gerda Taranow, *The Bernhardt Hamlet: Culture and Context*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) 152.

¹⁹ Howard, 108

²⁰ Howard, 109

allowed Hamlet to win the complete his ambitious goal. Traditionally it is Laertes who is the complimentary character, or foil, for Hamlet rather than Ophelia, but because there were two female bodied people on stage playing lovers, Ophelia had to become the foil for Hamlet. She drew out his masculinity with her enhanced femininity. Bernhardt seemed to be aware of this need to emphasize contrast, and purposefully staged moments, such as the aforementioned funeral marches, to further achieve this juxtaposition.

Sarah Bernhardt returned Hamlet to the Senecan revenge tragedy hero he was intended to be by shaking off her femininity, much like Lady Macbeth preparing to encourage her husband's quest for power. The production received riotously positive reviews reviews from her French audience.²¹ The reviews did not take issue with her gender, rather praising the great actress on her powerful performance in this difficult role. However, Bernhardt's *Hamlet* received only mixed to negative reviews from English speaking audiences. According to *The Sunday Times*, audiences "could never, even for a single instant escape from the consciousness that it was a man's part being tendered by a woman."²² However, this was the point of the entire production. Bernhardt's French audiences never forgot that they were watching the Bernhardt *Hamlet*, adding rather than detracting from its charm. No matter how much she adapted another character, she was always herself, displaying "her wonderful art and wonderful personality"²³ in all her performances. Her ability to transform herself yet declare her persona was the 19th century French mark of a great performer. Although she was not the ideal performer for Hamlet, her

²¹ Tumbleson, 197.

²² *The Sunday Times*, June 12 Howard 109

²³ *The Times*, June 12 Howard 109

presence in the part demanded attention. Bernhardt was the most famous actress in the world, she did not need more publicity, but this is what the role of Hamlet brought her. She did not need the attention, but what Hamlet gave her was satisfaction. Satisfaction at the completion of a challenge, and satisfaction at a profound artistic achievement.

The distaste for her production is surprising due to the pervasive popularity of her image in the role in the English language. She played the part in three major Atlantic theatre cities—Paris, London and New York and met with large, clamorous audiences both in those cities and their surrounding theatre towns. However, Bernhardt’s stardom and relentless self-promotion have left an indelible impact on the part of Hamlet and of the entire concept of acting—in fact, a photograph of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet is the first graphic on the wikipedia article on “Acting.” Her Hamlet remains iconic both for Bernhardt as a performer and for women as performers. Women in theatre in the late 19th century had a good amount of autonomy as the arts facilitated a way for them to work and earn money independently of a husband. Bernhardt’s lifestyle was nearly nomadic and she relied on these deep friendships and loves to follow her around. She notoriously had many affairs and a sordid relationship with her only husband Jaques Damala who left her out of jealousy for her career.²⁴ Her lifestyle was a pinnacle of the idealized french bohemian lifestyle. Bernhardt, although married, lived and travelled with a following of friends and lovers, referred to as “Bernhardt’s Court.”

Bernhardt, Gender and Sexuality

In July of 1843 William Cullen Bryant wrote an article for the *Evening Post* in which he described a trip he took to Vermont where he observed what he described as a beautiful “female

²⁴ Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Madame Sarah* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1967). 222.

friendship” between unmarried women. “In their youthful days, they took each other as companions for life, and this union, no less sacred to them than the tie of marriage has subsisted in uninterrupted harmony, for 40 years, during which they have...slept on the same pillow and had a common purse, and adopted each other’s relations.”²⁵ A hundred years later, a similar article would have sparked Helmanesque public outrage and the couple in question would have had to sue Bryant to clear their names. However, in 1843, an article on women living together as life partners was received amicably from the public. These relationships between women were considered to be different from those of male homosexuals who had strict laws against them that enforced societal moral codes. The 19th century standard of same-sex romantic relationships between women were largely monogamous “romantic friendships” between presumably heterosexual spinsters.

Homosexual women generally lived in a society that denied their sexuality. These women were presumed celibate, and therefore could engage in romantic same gender relationships without being perceived as morally corrupt. Yet, some historians believe that physical intimacy was not a part of the lesbian lifestyle in this period. In fact, “there is no evidence of [lesbian] genital sexuality in Victorian homoromantic relationships... but rather of cultivated asexuality.”²⁶ The concept of the female as asexual was so pervasive in Victorian moral sensibility that it is likely that women supported and embraced that notion through their behaviors. However, there were some deviances from this as the culture started to transition out of the strict morality of the

²⁵ William Cullen Bryant to the *Evening Post*, July 13, 1843, in *Letters of William Cullen Bryant*, vol. 2, eds. William Cullen Bryant II and Thomas

²⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1991) 2.

19th century. The famous sexuality of superstar Sarah Bernhardt may have served as a driving force.

Cultural Judaism was considered exotic by 19th century European standards and people of Jewish descent would be compared to people of African descent. Bernhardt's mother Youle Bernhardt was a courtesan whose extreme success was not hindered by her Jewish background, in fact her success depended on the orientalization and consumption of Jewishness. In mid 19th century Paris "every self-respecting bordello offered at least one Jewish girl and one black girl for the connoisseurs of exotica."²⁷ Although Bernhardt converted to Catholicism in her late childhood, she was born Jewish and continued to culturally identify as such throughout her life and was identified by the public as a Jewish performer above all else. Because of her stereotypically large nose and wiry hair, her label of Jewishness was impossible to remove, so instead Bernhardt embraced it. She is frequently pictured in the art nouveau prints by Alphonse Mucha as surrounded by delicate, golden stars of David with her name in Hebrew styled script in a glamorous romanticization of Jewish ethnicity,²⁸ while other less kind artists portray her with a hooked nose, wiry unkempt hair with large yellow Stars of David emblazoned across the top in a nearly anti-Semitic attack.²⁹ Sarah was exoticized for her Jewishness. She was also very open to the public about her many romantic affairs with men—her only son was the illegitimate child of a Belgian Prince. Bernhardt's many love affairs even include French author Victor Hugo and actor Mount-Sully.

²⁷ Gold and Fizdale, 13.

²⁸Alphonse Mucha, *Farewell American Tour Sarah Bernhardt 1905-6*, 1905. Color lithograph poster. Laura Gold, Park South Gallery at Carnegie Hall, New York.

²⁹ Henri Demare, "Sarah Bernhardt: queleus chapitres de sa vie," 1883, Print. Reproduced in *Le Grelot* (18 February 1883).

Bernhardt was an international superstar and embraced her exoticness and eroticness. She was considered an alluring beauty and was admired, rather than shamed, for her sexual openness and started sexual trends among women. In a famous portrait by George Clairin (1876), a young Bernhardt is seen lounging seductively on a chaise longue in a white silk fur-lined robe. She holds a pipe and alluringly stares directly at the viewer.³⁰ This was a decidedly masculine pose. Her pose, smoking, and directness all suggest power and confidence. This striking portrait became incredibly popular and copies of the portrait were fashionable among young women. Women would assume the same pose that Bernhardt lounged in in her famous portrait by George Clairin and give them to their lovers.³¹ This suggests a culture of sexual directness and confidence led by Bernhardt. She was considered the epitome of sexualized beauty in 19th century Europe, both despite and because of her exoticness. Bernhardt effectively influenced female sexual autonomy through demonstration and dissemination.

Bernhardt enjoyed visual artists and maintained several friendships with great painters of the Belle Époque. Among these people was female artist Louise Abbéma. Abbéma was Bernhardt's official portrait painter and sketched, painted and sculpted the actress many times in the course of their relationship. Abbéma was widely known as a very good friend of Bernhardt's. Abbéma and Bernhardt lived together for about a decade. Although Bernhardt is typically synonymous with the performing arts, she was also an accomplished visual artist and over fifty of her artworks have been documented. Her most famous sculpture, and arguably her best, is the

³⁰ George Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*, 1876. La Musée de Petit Palais, Paris France.

³¹ Gold and Fildale, 145.

eponymously named *Bust of Louise Abbéma*.³² The artwork that they did together led them to be referred to by the public as “sisters in art.”³³ These two women travelled, lived, and presented art together and had a clearly intimate and fulfilling friendship. Bernhardt had a collection of friends who followed her around in her travels, often referred to as the “Bernhardt Court,”³⁴ but Abbéma was connected to Bernhardt for a longer period of time, and seems to have genuinely enjoyed and loved her.

George Lecocq’s early and brief history on Louise Abbéma, written in 1879 and published in 1881 refers at length to the relationship between Bernhardt and Abbéma, but does not directly address it. Rather, he coyly refers to their communal living arrangements. Abbéma’s studio received a hefty portion of this analysis. He wrote that her workspace had a large series of photographs of Bernhardt that “all bore the modest dedication ‘To Louise Abbéma, the greatest artist, [from] Sarah Bernhardt, the other greatest artist.’”³⁵ He goes on to describe the couple more in depth: “what is exaggerated about this slightly bombastic declaration of friendship could make you smile; but certainly we should sincerely rejoice in the affection which unites these two young women because we owe to it some remarkable works which, without it, would not have seen the light of day.”³⁶ Lecocq’s portrayal of the relationship between Bernhardt and Abbéma is a textbook interpretation of the 19th century lesbian couple as a chaste homo-romantic

³² Sarah Bernhardt, *Bust of Louise Abbéma*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

³³ Harispe, 'Louise Abbéma', *Revue illustrée*, vol. 1 (1907), 113-121 (117). Cited in Miranda Eve Mason, *Making Love/Making Work: The Sculpture Practice of Sarah Bernhardt*, vol. II. (Leeds, England: University of Leeds) 2007, 398.

³⁴ Skinner, 211.

³⁵ George Lecocq, *Louise Abbéma*, 1879. Cited in Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 85.

³⁶ *IBID*, Lecocq.

relationship. This de-eroticized interpretation of this relationship is disingenuous to the reality of their relationship that was tender, loving, and intimate.



Louise Abbéma: *Sarah Bernhardt*

The truth of Bernhardt’s lesbianism became solidified about sixty years after her death when an unusual painting by Belle Epoque artist Louise Abbéma was donated to The Comédie-Française in 1988 from a private collection from a personal friend of the couple. It was donated to the theatre under the condition that “its subject matter be made clear.”³⁷ The donor explained that the painting was of Bernhardt and Abbéma on a boat on the bois de Boulogne “on the day of the anniversary of the amorous liaison.”³⁸ In a recent edition of the *Robert dictionnaire de la*

³⁷ Miranda Eve Mason, *Making Love/Making Work: The Sculpture Practice of Sarah Bernhardt*, vol. II. (Leeds, England: University of Leeds) 2007, 424.

³⁸Josiane Ayoub to Noelle Guibert, 18 March 1990, BMCF, dossier Sarah Bernhardt.

langue française to be 'en liaison' denotes both a mode of working and of 'feeling in an intimate relationship,' but can also be translated, albeit more colloquially, as “bonding,” as in masonry, to refer to a stabilizing force: both lovely images for the deepness and fondness of their relationship. The painting is large and ambitious and this tribute likely reflects the value placed by Abbéma on their relationship and is the best evidence of a romantic affair that has surfaced to date.

Bernhardt's narrative fits neatly into the secrecy of lesbian relationships of the 19th century, but the exotic and erotic Sarah Bernhardt was not a notorious lesbian, nor was she a homoromantic spinster. It is impossible to know if she would have self-identified as a lesbian, but it appears that she had a deep romantic bond with long time friend and partner Louise Abbéma. Their relationship was viewed with the same placidity given to other same-sex female partnerships, but new and reviewed evidence suggests that this relationship was deeper and more intimate than traditional friendship. In the painting, the seated Bernhardt, seated femininely in white gauzy dress is joined in a boat by Abbéma who wears a dark, fitted outfit, haloed by a red parasol. Both portrayed as conventionally beautiful, their relationship is still portrayed on a male-female heterosexual dichotomy, with the female represented by the fair Bernhardt and the male represented by the strong Abbéma. This painting is different from other paintings by Abbéma that place the subject in the foreground, but that is because it was a private work. It was a personal gift representative of their love, meant to hang in the home that they shared.

Bernhardt's likely bisexuality was indulged by her frequent world tours. She had many brief liaisons, including Eva Le Gallienne's father, the poet Richard Le Gallienne. Le Gallienne's youthful ambition to play Hamlet was influenced by the theatre of her childhood and youth, and

by Sarah Bernhardt. Both of Le Gallienne's parents admired Sarah, When Bernhardt gave her performance of *Hamlet* at Stratford-upon-Avon, poet Richard Le Gallienne and his wife Julie Nørregaard attended, and waited with the crowd to see Sarah leave the theatre.³⁹ Richard Le Gallienne noted in his *Travels in England* that "today [they] gazed, with that exaltation of the soul in the spectacle of any greatness, at the strange beauty, the imperious dissection, the siren charm of Sarah Bernhardt."⁴⁰ It is not noted in his book, but after this, Richard began an affair with Bernhardt that continued for an undisclosed amount of time, but Bernhardt was reported to keep a photograph of Richard on her night stand for many months following their liaison.⁴¹ Even though Richard and Julie Nørregaard (Le Gallienne's mother) both saw her performance in Stratford-upon-Avon, Richard left his wife to accompany Bernhardt back to London in her private coach.

Nørregaard, a Danish journalist, considered Bernhardt her favorite artist and was able to meet her through a mutual friend. Nørregaard took young Eva to see Sarah for the first time in *Sleeping Beauty* in 1906 when Eva was seven. Although Bernhardt was over sixty years old and playing the youthful, virile Prince Charming, Eva was enthralled and firmly resolved at that moment to become an actress, an event that she expressed to a journalist for *The New York Times* in 1916. She went on to enthuse "Oh, I'm mad about her!... She is my ideal of greatness in art. For a long time I wanted to meet her, and one day through some stage friends of my mother I was taken to see her. And I have met her twice since. And the last time, when I was coming away

³⁹ Richard Le Gallienne, *Travels in England*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1900), 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

⁴¹ Eva le Gallienne, "S.B. Quand-Meme," *Forum* 11 (Summer-Fall 1973), 34. Cited in Robert Schanke, *Shattered Applause: The Eva Le Gallienne Story*, (New York: Barricade Books, 1992) 14.

and told her that I, too, meant to give my life to the stage, something very lovely happened! She gave me the flowers she had just worn in the play, *La Dame aux Camélias*—lovely artificial flowers that look almost like real hot-house camélias... I always put the flowers in a locket which I wear always. It is my talisman!”⁴² All that Le Gallienne was in theatre she owed to the inspiration from Bernhardt. Although there were other women that inspired Le Gallienne’s career, Eleonora Duse, Ellen Terry, Alla Nazimova, are chief among them, Bernhardt was always the primary focal point for Le Gallienne’s obsessive tendencies. Her obsession with Bernhardt would remain for her entire life. She would note in her autobiography that her study, fondly referred to as the “blue room” was decorated by an original Alphonse Mucha print of the actress as Lorenzaccio, a version of Lorenzo d’Medici, a troubled, renaissance youth not unlike Hamlet—in fact, Bernhardt referred to the youth as “the Florentine Hamlet.”⁴³ There was a life long magnetism towards Bernhardt for Le Gallienne, for reasons of which even she herself was not certain. She regularly described Bernhardt as one of the greatest actors of all time, but perhaps there was a subtle communion, a streak of recognition between the two queer women. Le Gallienne could not have known of Bernhardt’s supposed lesbianism, but Bernhardt was a stage celebrity famous for her male roles—potentially quite attractive and impactful for young Le Gallienne. Bernhardt was always spiritually present for Le Gallienne. Her obsession does not appear to have been unhealthy and was born of genuine respect and admiration for the older woman. Eva Le Gallienne was a significant lesbian celebrity in the 1920s. Her sexuality was calmly overlooked by the public in her youth, but well known to other artists, wealthy society,

⁴² “Who’s Who in the Theatre”, *The New York Times*, September 23, 1916

⁴³ Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, 137. Translation: H.J. Stenning. London: Geoffrey Bles. 1917.

and the press. As a well known lesbian, Le Gallienne was an active participant in the lesbian chic revolution as a well known young lesbian. She had many intimacies with women, both in and out of serious committed relationships and the theatrical community. The lesbian identity and experience of Eva Le Gallienne fits neatly into the narrative of female sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s.



Eva Le Gallienne

Unconventional, yet ethereally attractive with penetrating ice blue eyes, an impish nose and a melancholy mouth, Eva Le Gallienne's fame was rapidly increasing in the early 1920s after her star turn as Julie in Ferenc Molnar's *Lilom*. She was a popular model for advertisements, promoting everything from theatre to cosmetics to fashion. In a 1918 advertisement for Abercrombie and Fitch she is seen modeling golf and riding pants, an unusual choice for other young models. According to Helen Sheehy's intimate biography of Le Gallienne, these pictures

taken of her were among her favorites. “She thought that she looked dashing and wicked in her male attire. She hoped that Nazimova [a woman she had unreciprocated passion for] would see them.”⁴⁴ Wearing traditionally male clothes was nonconformist and meant to be eroticized for the male gaze in response to the rapid sexualization of women. However, the “loosening of constraints of femininity”⁴⁵ was a sudden gain in freedom for the lesbian community. Le Gallienne’s adoption of pants as early as 1918 was a symbol of liberation,⁴⁶ that timed nicely with her personal liberation as a young professional.⁴⁷ In a world structured into male and female dichotomies and pairings, Le Gallienne not only recognized, but felt that “it would have been so much simpler if she had been born a boy.”⁴⁸ Even so, gender was not a burden for Le Gallienne in her professional life, her passion, dedication, and gumption opened all doors for her, but she lived in an era where she could not express her love publicly, which perhaps damaged her private life.

It was only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that female sexuality for personal pleasure and self expression became mainstream knowledge, and deviances from sexual norms became slightly more public.⁴⁹ Rather than use the euphemisms of the 19th century, women began to describe themselves with more blatant terms: homosexual, bisexual, or lesbian.

⁴⁴ Helen Sheehy, *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) 73.

⁴⁵ Nicky Hallett, *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/Biography in the Twentieth Century*, (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press), 55.

⁴⁶ Hallett, 56.

⁴⁷ Sheehy, 52.

⁴⁸ Sheehy, 73.

⁴⁹ Dorothy and Carl J Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920: Change, Challenge & The Struggle for Women’s Rights*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 141.

Homosexuality, for many, was “the ultimate in rebellion.”⁵⁰ It rejected all social morays and courtship laws. It could only be done outside of parental involvement and supervision and was representative of modern independence.

Le Gallienne’s first reciprocated love was another young woman named Mary Duggett, who Le Gallienne always called “Mimsey.” They met in 1917 and almost immediately began a romantic relationship. This relationship, although impossible to know its physical intimacy, was clearly romantic and emotionally intimate. Le Gallienne’s relationship with Duggett allowed both of them to live independently of their parents under the ruse of friendship and roommates. They maintained a largely happy relationship over four years, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Yet although they enjoyed the freedom of a largely accepting urban life, they had to engage in precautions that heterosexual couples did not. Mary had a number of male friends that made Eva uncomfortable. One particularly ardent young man named Harry made life especially uncomfortable for Eva. Although Mary insisted that he was a “dupe,”⁵¹ a male date meant to convince others that she and Eva were truly no more than friends, Eva sensed otherwise. Eva’s suspicion of Mary’s heteronormative desires were confirmed in 1922, when Mary married a man named Stuart Benson while Eva was on national tour with *Not so Long Ago*. This discovery made Le Gallienne inconsolable.⁵² In the 1920s, “homosexual” was solidifying into a common identity and people who had casually partaken in same sex relationships were pressured into either identifying as such or returning to conventional heterosexuality, and many did. Duggett’s

⁵⁰ Hallett, 27.

⁵¹ Eva Le Gallienne, Diary Entry, August 21, 1918. Cited in Helen Sheehy, 72.

⁵² Sheehy, 84.

move to domesticity align her with many other women of her generation who, had they been born a hundred years later, may have identified as lesbian, bisexual, or any of the variations of the sexuality spectrum, but felt that conventional heterosexual life and marriage was easier than the life of a homosexual outsider.

Although many women transitioned back to heteronormative relationships, it retained its urban popularity, and sexual relationships with women were considered a great adventure, based on contemporary literature and biography. Some women who had sex with other women accepted the title of lesbian or homosexual and committed to the new lifestyle. However, even women who were only exploratory lesbians were able to participate in the new lesbian subculture, focused largely in the artistic bohemian hubs of the Greenwich Village and Harlem. “Harlem had a particular appeal for whites who wanted to indulge in rebel sexuality.”⁵³ Although homosexuality was a difficult life, it had its own glamour in rebellion that identified neatly with the rebellious culture of the 1920s. This newly found excitement of homosexuality was expressed primarily in nightclubs and cabarets and was, like drinking, forbidden, enhancing its appeal.

Illegal speakeasies and shady nightspots in Harlem were popular destinations for Le Gallienne and her flurry of other queer and artist friends, including her long term lover Mercedes de Acosta. According to de Acosta, “I suppose it was the newly found excitement of homosexuality, which after the war was expressed openly in nightclubs and cabarets by boys dressed as women, and was, like drinking, forbidden and subject to police raids, which made it

⁵³ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 63.

all the more enticing.”⁵⁴ The concept of “lesbian chic” prevailed in popularity for the underbelly of glamorized urban culture, deeply tied to the bacchanalia of the 1920s. It was a term assigned to bisexual experimentation in the decade following World War One. During World War One “gender lines at the workplace became less discrete for many American women than before.”⁵⁵ After the end of World War One, America partook in a bacchanalian, adolescent, hedonistic exploration of rules, boundaries, and social rules. As an extension of the well documented transparency of pre-marital heterosexual intimacies, there was also a sexual revolution for queer men and women.

Mercedes de Acosta was six years older than Le Gallienne. She was a Spanish poet and playwright married to a man named Abram Poole. Although her plays were contemporarily well known because of her status as a wealthy socialite, de Acosta never achieved professional success. de Acosta courted Le Gallienne with expensive presents and flattery, but she conquered her with a powerful eroticism that aroused, perhaps for the first time, “an adult carnality in Le Gallienne.”⁵⁶ She was in total sexual thrall with de Acosta. Le Gallienne was on tour with *Lilom* and de Acosta split her time between New York and Spain, so their visits were short and passionate. de Acosta consumed Le Gallienne’s life. She had an “agonizing aching”⁵⁷ for her love whenever they were parted. This was a different sort of love than the love of companionship that Le Gallienne had had with Duggett. It is unknown if Le Gallienne’s relationship with Duggett had a sexual element to it, but it is confirmed through the correspondence of the Le

⁵⁴ Typescript with corrections, folder 02:03, 221, Rosenbach Museum. Cited in Robert A. Schanke, 57.

⁵⁵ Lillian Faderman, “The Great War’s Lesbian Legacy,” (The Gay and Lesbian Review, 1999) 3.

⁵⁶ Sheehy,96.

⁵⁷ Le Gallienne to Mercedes de Acosta, Feb 10, 1922. Cited in Sheehy.

Gallienne and de Acosta that their relationship was not. It was based on the passion and excitement of short visits and forbidden love.

Popularity of watered down Freudian principles of sexuality brought the various forms of human sexuality to the awareness of the greater general public. His work was oft cited, sometimes accurately, but often not, and his principles seeped into the common parlance of sexuality. Freudian analysis of sexuality was the overwhelming ideological approach to differentiation in human sexuality. In Katherine Davis' 1926 study of 1200 unmarried women, it was found that over one half of them had "at some time or other experienced intense emotional relations which other women, and that over a quarter admit that the relationship was carried to the point of overt sexual expression."⁵⁸ Davis's study shows the high level of academic thought surrounding the study of sex. Although disproven Freudian principles drove this academic thought, Freud gave people, both academic and public, contextualization for understanding differences in sexuality. Freudian principles were not only the resounding ideas about literal sexuality, but also bled over into artistic conception—including the resounding interpretations of *Hamlet*.

Le Gallienne's chief achievement was perhaps the creation of her Civic Repertory Theatre in 1926. It was a revitalization of the repertory theatre system in America, a system that had endured in Europe. The repertory system involves one company of actors that perform a series of shows over a week. It is an endurance art and demands complete dedication and variation from performers. In 1926, Le Gallienne bought the Fourteenth Street Theatre. Neighboring Broadway, this 1100 seat theatre had once been a great playhouse, but since about

⁵⁸ Katherine Davis, "Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-two Hundred Women," *Harper Magazine*, 1929.

1910 had only been a movie theatre. Le Gallienne refurbished the theatre and established her repertory theatre at only twenty-seven years old. The leadership roles in her theatre were all filled by women, and the company was nicknamed the “Le Gallienne sorority.”⁵⁹ Her theatre was a haven for female artists. The majority of the women who worked at the Civic Repertory were under the age of forty and collaborated on nearly all productions. It was an idyllic theatre for these young women. they produced excellent, varied, and collaborative theatre in New York City in a significant theatre, and were able to charge a top ticket price of \$1.50, appealing to the immigrant and student populations of the area.

Josephine Hutchinson (1903-1998) was a successful actress and alumna of the Civic Rep. During her stay with the repertory theatre, she began a long term love affair with Le Gallienne. This relationship caused the dissolution of the marriage between Josephine Hutchinson and her husband four years earlier. This coincided with an attack on Lesbianism in the American Theatre in a moralistic rampage.⁶⁰ Although homosexuality was accepted as normal and moral in the New York theatre community, it was still viewed as a shameful oddity by the majority of America. Le Gallienne’s lesbianism was not a secret for her social circle or even the Broadway community, it was not something of national awareness. Biographer Helen Sheehy maintained a personal friendship with Le Gallienne in the last years of her life. Although *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography* is full of intimate information that only a close friend with access to a hundred years of personal letters might know, many sordid details of Le Gallienne’s life are mostly glossed over. For example, the devastation of the divorce between Josephine Hutchinson and her

⁵⁹ Sheehy, 149.

⁶⁰ Howard, 125.

husband in 1930—a divorce that Le Gallienne was reportedly cited in as a co-respondent.

Hutchinson was a young actress in the Civic Repertory theatre that had a long term relationship with Le Gallienne that spanned from about 1928 to 1934. Although Le Gallienne did have a romantic relationship with Hutchinson, her name is nowhere on the legal documents.⁶¹

Regardless of the accuracy of the events, legitimate newspapers as well as tabloids published articles with inflammatory titles such as “Le Gallienne Shadow Actress is Divorced,”⁶² “shadow” was a common euphemism for lesbian, and devastated the private Le Gallienne. She valiantly tried to correct the rumors, but her protests merely encouraged the idea that she was hiding the truth of the divorce.⁶³ The summer of 1930 was the summer of the tabloid crisis. Le Gallienne’s personal life received more publicity than her theatre that summer, which made her an actress famous for her lesbianism rather than her philanthropic theatrical pursuits.

In neither of Le Gallienne’s autobiographies is there any mention of romantic attachments. In the end of her first autobiography, *At 33*, Le Gallienne thanks “all over the country people seemed to be sending me kind thoughts; I’m sure they helped me through an ordeal that had somehow cut my life in two.”⁶⁴ Although she is directly referring to an explosion that put her in the hospital for almost a year and horribly scarred for the rest of her life,⁶⁵ she also seems to be referring to the scandal that forever marred her career. Le Gallienne was well-known

⁶¹ *Shattered Applause*, 89.

⁶² *New York Daily News*, “Le Gallienne Shadow Actress is Divorced” July 9, 1930.

⁶³ *Shattered Applause*, 89.

⁶⁴ *At 33*, 236.

⁶⁵ Le Gallienne was a master of stage make up. The only visible scarring in her professional persona was a slight droop to her right eyebrow

for being a lesbian, but she was also powerful and charismatic. Her lesbianism did not affect her work, nor did it stop her from creating the art that she wanted. Perhaps if she had reached this part of her life in a more conservative, prejudiced era there would have been more public backlash, but there was not. The dominant liberal culture of the 1920s and 1930s were relatively accepting of deviations from sexual norms, it was considered something to be done very privately. Lesbians and lesbian relationships on stage were still foreign and unacceptable.

The theatre ran for eight years until the theatre was shut down by the Great Depression in 1932. In their eight years of operation they produced thirty two plays. Le Gallienne directed thirty of those and played a principle or lead supporting role in each one, and designed many of them. The theatre specialized in revitalizing classic plays and facilitating new work, largely by women playwrights. Through these projects, Le Gallienne was able to play any role that she wanted. Le Gallienne is most famous for her interpretations and original translations of Chekov and Ibsen, but she also specialized in Shakespeare. Although the theatre ran for a very successful few seasons, it was not immune to the financial turmoil of the Great Depression and shut down in 1932.

After the Civic Repertory Theatre closed, Le Gallienne toured the country with a selection of Ibsen plays between 1933 and 1934 with a number of former cast members from the Civic Rep, including her lover Jo Hutchinson. This tour brought out the worst of Eva's qualities, and her personal relationships and suffered. Hutchinson would later say that "Eva had enormous confidence which come across as arrogance. She had bodily strength and courage and the arrogance. She believed in her own possibilities...She never treated me as an equal, I knew

that.”⁶⁶ Over the course of this tour, Hutchinson signed a significant movie contract and ended her relationship with Le Gallienne. Le Gallienne’s masculine arrogance was her fatal trait, but it also manifested as supreme confidence. This confidence fostered an emotional barrier that is necessary to taking career risks—like playing Hamlet as a woman.

In her 1952 autobiography *With a Quiet Heart*, Le Gallienne noted that “At the age of sixteen, soon after I started work in the theatre, I made a list of the parts I was determined to play before turning forty...The list was as follows

1. Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder*
2. Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*
3. Peter in *Peter Pan*
4. Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*
5. Marguerite Gautier in *Camille*
6. The Duc de Reichstadt in *L’Aiglon*
7. Hamlet in *Hamlet* ⁶⁷

With only three years left before she turned forty she decided to keep faith with herself and complete her list of dream roles she had created at the beginning of her career. Out of the seven roles, only four are female characters. Le Gallienne’s exploration in gender and gender identity, though not as much of a hallmark on her career as it was for Bernhardt, still marked her ambitions—particularly her young ones. Peter Pan and Juliet are important roles for the English language, her Danish heritage and feminism obviate her love for the Ibsen plays, and her

⁶⁶ Josephine Hutchinson to Helen Sheehy. Cited in Sheehy, 224.

⁶⁷ Eva Le Gallienne, *With a Quiet Heart*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), 103.

obsession with Bernhardt put the last three roles on the list, as she famously played all of them—the last two her most famous male roles.

She chose to produce her *Hamlet* far away from her adopted home of New York City. Because of her recent tabloid spectacle and the enduring pain of losing the Civic Rep to the Great Depression, she wanted to produce her passion project in a house that was inconvenient for critics. At the request of Raymond Moore, manager of the Cape Playhouse, Le Gallienne took her production to their small regional space in Massachusetts. Although the Civic Rep had closed in 1932, at the height of the depression, this production was an echo of her intense work.

Similarly to Bernhardt, Le Gallienne's *Hamlet* was truly a Le Gallienne *Hamlet*. Not only did she star in the production, she also directed, designed, produced, and served as dramaturg—the expert on the script and its editor. She developed the unique thematic elements specific to her production. Like her idol, she placed her Hamlet as a very young man—however her Hamlet was a bit younger than Bernhardt's. "At eighteen, his weakness and hesitation, his abnormal bitterness at his mother's sudden remarriage, are natural." She believed that it was possible "for an actress at the height of her powers to give the impression of being a boy, while having at her command all the craft, range, force, and subtlety which such great role require,"⁶⁸ with this reasoning, a female Hamlet seems to be the obvious choice, just as a female Peter Pan is an obvious choice. The choice to change Hamlet's age was a matter of both practicality and artistic choice. Eva had a youthful and impish face—ideal for playing youths, but unconvincing as adult men. However, her artistic and ideological reasoning for placing Hamlet as an adolescent young man is sound. In Furness's *Variorum*, William Minto, in reference to *Hamlet*, suggests that "sad

⁶⁸ Elliott Norton, "Le Gallienne Hamlet," *Boston Sunday Post*, 25.

and thoughtful questionings of the mysteries of life are more than common among boys under twenty than among men of thirty...not only is it possible for sad thoughts to come to a youth of seventeen, but it is at such an age, when the character is not deeply founded, that the shattering of first ideals is most overwhelming...the fresher and brighter our conception of the gay boy-world out of which he was summoned, the deeper becomes the monstrous tint of the horrible ambition, murder and incest, which appalled his vision and paralyzed the clear working of his mind when he was first called upon to play a man's part in the battle of life."⁶⁹ These were qualities of Hamlet that Le Gallienne saw reflected in the text, which suggested that a female Hamlet might not just be warranted, but indeed the ideal performer for the part. An adult woman has the maturity and intellect to play the part, but can also pass as the youthful Hamlet intended by Shakespeare in the play's initial draft. This interpretation gave Le Gallienne the right to play the part, but only if she did it as a breeches role, because there was not enough liberalism in production in the 1930s to allow her to make such a wild decision as to play the part as a woman.

Le Gallienne's *Hamlet* was an homage to her idol. In last moment of the play as Hamlet lays dead on the throne, "Fortinbras and his soldiers entered. Four captains advanced to the throne...clamped their shields together, laid the dead Hamlet on his back, lifted the shields and Hamlet over their heads into the only light still operational, a 500-watt white beam shining directly downward on Hamlet's body, seeming to float in space, while a tremendous fanfare of trumpets rose to a climax, followed by a cannon roar as the curtain fell."⁷⁰ This hagiographic imagery was a direct homage to the phenomenally Christ-like ending that Bernhardt staged for

⁶⁹ Howard Horace Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Hamlet*, (Philadelphia and London: J.P. Lippencott Company, 1918). 22.

⁷⁰ E.B. Potter to Helen Sheehy, July 4 1992. Cited in *Eva Le Gallienne*, 247.

herself in the part. In *Women as Hamlet*, Tony Howard suggests that the Le Gallienne *Hamlet* was merely a personalized revival of Bernhardt's *Hamlet*.⁷¹ However, although the impetus for the Le Gallienne *Hamlet* was indeed the Bernhardt *Hamlet*, the style and tone of the production was totally different. Her moments of deliberate homage to the Bernhardt *Hamlet* was merely an acknowledgment of her idol, not an imitation of her.

Obsessed with the part and with the performance of Bernhardt, Le Gallienne had learned Hamlet's lines long before she actually began this project,⁷² which allowed her to be involved in all elements of production. Eva's design was simple: a thrust stage unit set with a dozen step units designed with an 11th century viking era aesthetic. Le Gallienne spearheaded the design elements herself, she even designed and made the fabrics on a loom in her Weston home. She set the color palate in grey, black and red. These colors reflect the barbarity of the era and of the play. The viking era was a masculine time, but also operated with strong female leadership, participation and autonomy—ideal for a feminized *Hamlet* that relies on some sort of lineage that allows rule over a monarchy to pass from King to Wife to Second Husband, instead of to his son. Shakespeare does not specify why this has happened, or what the rules of this world is, so it is up to each production to decide that. *Hamlet* is based on stories from the viking era, but up until the mid 20th century, it was uncommon to set Shakespearian dramas outside of Elizabethan England, unless they had a very specific aesthetic, such as *Julius Ceaser* or *Antony and Cleopatra*.

⁷¹ Howard, 124.

⁷² Sheehy, 245.

Le Gallienne wore a black jersey leotard with padded shoulders, but her tunic was red—a traditionally dominant color for Danish court.⁷³ The padded shoulders in addition to dolman sleeves and stitched together at the waist, this costume instantly added masculinity and disguised the fact that the role was played by a woman.

The casting of Ophelia was difficult for Le Gallienne's *Hamlet*. This would be the first show in which she acted in romantic scenes opposite a woman since she had been cited as a co-respondent for the dissolution of the marriage between Josephine Hutchinson and her husband four years earlier. An eighteen year old Uta Hagen had her first professional role as Ophelia in Le Gallienne's *Hamlet*. Le Gallienne prided herself on giving educational opportunities to young and deserving, but untried actors. At seventeen, Hagen wrote to Le Gallienne asking for her to give input on her performing abilities. Hagen was, according to Le Gallienne, "a tall, rather gawky creature, by no means pretty, but with a face that one remembered, large hands and feet, and the shy ungainly grace of a young colt."⁷⁴ After a grueling session that lasted several hours, during which Le Gallienne drilled Hagen on her chosen audition material (Shaw's *Saint Joan*),⁷⁵ Le Gallienne allowed her to leave. However, when considering who would play the Ophelia to her Hamlet, something about Hagen stuck in Le Gallienne's mind and young Hagen was offered the part.⁷⁶

⁷³ *Shattered Applause*, 162

⁷⁴ *With a Quiet Heart*, 110.

⁷⁵ Susan Spector, "Preparation for an Audition: Uta Hagen's Broadway Debut," *Theatre Survey* (May-November 1989), 112.

⁷⁶ *With a Quiet Heart*, 112.

The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia can be directed as chaste, but in order to justify Ophelia's descent into madness, there has to be an underlying sexual magnetism. Ophelia is often simplified and infantilized, but her intense and specific grief and madness actually place her as a second foil to Hamlet. She is not a plot device to spur Hamlet to action. Audience members are supposed to compare this teenaged girl with the virile hero. This more than anything suggests the propensity for a female or at least feminized Hamlet. We are supposed to place Hamlet and Ophelia in direct conversation with each other, just as we are with Laertes and Hamlet. Female Hamlets enhance and promote Ophelias to primary roles, rather than plot devices. Placed into conversation with Le Gallienne's famous and scandalous lesbianism, two female bodied people playing love scenes suggests scandal— but there apparently was none. Le Gallienne's performance of masculinity appears covered any problematic elements her personal life reflected onto the production.

Le Gallienne has a deep contralto voice, ideal for finding color, illumination and crispness when reading lines. In her old age, she looks like a dowager queen, but as a girl she looked like a fairy princess with her puck-like face. Her body had a lightness to it—she was an excellent athlete, completely apt for the difficult sword fight at the climax of the play. In that final fight against Laertes comes the challenge of the Hamletian foil. Laertes was an especially difficult role to cast. Laertes must mirror, enhance, and complement the characteristics of Hamlet—they are two sides of the same coin, however Laertes is a vastly smaller and less rewarding part and it was difficult for Le Gallienne to find a young, male actor willing to play this part opposite her for a brief, unpublicized run in Dennis, Massachusetts. She offered her friend and often co-star Richard Wagner the role, but he turned it down, confessing that “he [couldn't]

afford to play Laertes to a woman's Hamlet."⁷⁷ Laertes is the foil to Hamlet, and because they are meant to be viewed as directly in conversation with each other, a male Laertes playing to a female Hamlet would instantly feminize Laertes. That playing the foil to the lead would emasculate Wagner suggests not only attitudes towards gender and the general sense of the inferiority of women, but also the sacred nature of playing the part of Hamlet. Hamlet is culturally considered to be a crowning achievement for actors (typically male), but productions are uncommon because they usually revolve around the director believing that they have an actor with the energy, drive, youth, intelligence and sensitivity to play the part. Young men offered the part of Laertes to Le Gallienne's Hamlet felt that the part was beneath them, that playing a secondary part while allowing a woman the opportunity to experience this great role somehow lessened the experience and intensely devalued an often rewarding part. Bernhardt did not seem to have these casting issues. Both Laertes and Ophelia were easy roles to fill. This is likely because her Hamlet was performed at a more reputable theatre than Le Gallienne's, she was more famous than Le Gallienne, Bernhardt was at a career peak rather than a career ebb, and gender codes for theatre were less strict in the 1890s than in the 1930s.

Reviews from the local papers were very positive for the Le Gallienne *Hamlet*. She was praised for her delivery of lines,⁷⁸ her physicality of male youth, and fencing ability;⁷⁹ but the reviews from New York were negative, citing a cold, academic performance.⁸⁰ Yet, at the time of

⁷⁷ Le Gallienne to Julie Norrgard, July 1937. Cited in **Helen Sheehy, 245**

⁷⁸ Elinor Hughes, "Eva Le Gallienne Plays Role of Hamlet with Distinction," *The Boston Herald*, August 24, 1937.

⁷⁹ Elliott Norton, "Female Hamlets on Cape Cod Proved Notable," *Boston Sunday Post*, August 29, 1937.

⁸⁰ **Howard, 104.**

the production two producers wanted to remount the production in a new house. Lee Shubert suggested a brief Broadway run. If she had accepted, she would have been the first and only woman to have played Hamlet on Broadway. She refused, but noted in her second autobiography that “[she] shall always be ashamed that [she] did not have the courage to accept the offer.”⁸¹ Le Gallienne feared a return to Broadway where the spectacle of her performance, presence, endowment, and embodiment, would bring audiences in rather than her excellence of her performance. Le Gallienne feared that if she took her *Hamlet* to New York she would become a tabloid spectacle again and that was not something she felt that she could handle. She had dealt with lesbianism on a New York stage before, in 1930 she had produced the original production of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Alison's House*, a play about the sexuality of Emily Dickinson. However, that was before her public scandal with former lover Jo Hutchinson, and *Hamlet* was after. She was aware that the majority of her audiences came for the spectacle, even though she had purposefully relocated to Dennis, Massachusetts to escape such attention. In her 1952 autobiography, Le Gallienne noted that “the theatre was crowded every night. I was aware that many people came out of curiosity, expecting to see a freak performance, a ridiculous sort of stunt, came prepared to scoff.”⁸² Similarly to Bernhardt, Le Gallienne knew that people would be coming to see her on stage playing a famous male character, a romantic lead opposite a woman, rather than to see her interpret this great role. However, for Le Gallienne, it was not her immense fame that created the spectacle, but rumors from her personal life. Her relationship with Hutchinson colored her career long after the relationship ended. Hutchinson did not seem to have

⁸¹ Le Gallienne, *With a Quiet Heart*, 118.

⁸² *With a Quiet Heart*, 114.

the same problem. She was on the cusp of fame rather than in the middle of it. Le Gallienne was known as a famous lesbian, rather than a great actress. It eclipsed her work.



Cassie Fastabend

In April 2015, actress Cassie Fastabend played Hamlet at the University of Puget Sound on the Norton Clapp stage to thunderous acclaim. Michael Pennington believes that someone who plays Hamlet must be an actor that makes the blood quicken. Fastabend is just that. She practices radical empathy and is impressively intelligent with a dramaturgical mind. In appearance she is more Le Gallienne than Bernhardt, with gentle, feminine features and startlingly bright eyes, though hers are a warm grey as opposed to Le Gallienne's ice blue—but her voice is the golden mezzo of a young Sarah Bernhardt. Bernhardt and Le Gallienne, respecting the intent of the original piece, played Hamlet as a man. Fastabend played the part as

a woman. When making creative decisions for the production we decided that it was disingenuous to have Fastabend play the opposite gender. Unlike her predecessors in the role, Fastabend, director Sikander Sohail, and I, the dramaturg, decided that she should play the role as a woman. The script was cut and the pronouns rewritten to reflect this. “He” became “she,” “lord” became “lady,” and “prince” became “princess.” The roles of Laertes, Ophelia, and Horatio were also played by women, and with some clever, or perhaps irreverent, cutting we were able to contextualize this play as about four college aged women destroyed by their grief. Mattea Prison, my assistant dramaturg, played Laertes. Tall and athletic with light blonde hair, wide eyes and full lips, Prison was both the feminine ideal and the masculine ideal as Laertes. When placed against Fastabend’s female Hamlet, Hannah Monsour’s female Horatio and Claire Martin’s female Ophelia, Prison’s Laertes became the apex of masculinity in a highly feminine play. This directly contradicts Richard Wagner’s fears about playing Laertes. He worried that playing foil to a woman would feminize his performance, but when Laertes and Hamlet are both played by actual young women, the masculinity of Laertes becomes magnified. According to Fastabend, “The relationships [the young characters had] were enhanced because we were women. Not only enhanced, but turned transcendent. I think we all saw through this process that [Hamlet] is a story about everybody. It is a story about people going through trauma and going through grief—the poison of deep grief—and the intense searching of pain.”⁸³

Similarly to Bernhardt, Fastabend chose Hamlet because of the immense challenge that the role gave her. “I cried a lot [as I started to learn this character] —tears of just joy because my whole life I sort of wanted the opportunity that was sort of the biggest thing I could possibly

⁸³ Cassie Fastabend, Author Interview, May 13, 2015.

choose to do.”⁸⁴ But Fastabend did not want the additional challenge of playing the role as a man. Contemporarily, women playing a male Hamlet does not read as well. Another recent female Hamlet, Maxine Peak at the Royal Exchange in Manchester in 2014, played the role as an androgynous woman who used female pronouns but male titles. Hamlet is defined by the actor who plays her. Sohail and I decided it would be disingenuous to both Fastabend and our audience to have her try and impersonate a man. Fastabend’s Hamlet was cutting, intelligent, funny, joyful, and vulnerable.

Unlike Bernhardt and Le Gallienne, Fastabend very much sits on the inside of society. She is conventionally attractive, intelligent, christian, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. However, her Hamlet was more on the outside of society than previous female Hamlets because as we did not change the gender of Ophelia, or chasten their relationship, Fastabend played an openly queer Hamlet. For Fastabend this was not a problem, but it revealed new colors in the text. Hamlet, as a twenty-one year old lesbian and a public member of Elsinore society, became more rebellious, but also had a heavier weight of guilt. Lines like “why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” had new meaning, true to many experiences of queer people.

Fastabend’s process is rooted in dramaturgical textual analysis. She refers to the concept of a “crack” in the script, or a moment of complete personal truth, in her breakdown of her lines.

⁸⁴ Cassie Fastabend, Author interview. May 13, 2015.

For Fastabend, there were only three moments in the play she felt were true cracks.⁸⁵ But the search for these moments made “Hamlet addicting to play.”⁸⁶ These were moments of transcendence that allowed the earth to shatter with pure human truth. She was only able to find three moments of profound truth. Hamlet is complex, no actor is able to find every crack, which is why Fastabend believes the role has maintained its importance for actors. We look forward to mounting Hamlet again in fifteen years when we are the same age as Le Gallienne’s Hamlet and in another fifteen when we are the same age as Bernhardt’s Hamlet. Perhaps then we will know each earth shattering truth in this play.

Conclusions:

Theatre saw significant changes between the Bernhardt *Hamlet* of 1899 and the Le Gallienne *Hamlet* of 1937. In these forty years, the actor-manager system of the 19th century had all but totally fallen into obscurity. Le Gallienne was not an actor-manager, but she ran her theatre as if she was one in a theatrical decade that did not allow that. Her downfall was her dedication to an antiquated system. She was known as arrogant and difficult to work with—these were qualities were also ascribed to Bernhardt, but as she was le Grande Dame of the French stage, she was allowed her domineering attitude. There were no Grande Dames of the American

⁸⁵ These lines were “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue,” in *O That this Too, Too Solid Flesh Would Melt*; “Who would these Fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscovered Country, from whose bourn/ No Traveller returns, Puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have, Than fly to others that we know not of,” in *To Be or Not to Be* and ““while, to my shame, I see / The imminent death of twenty thousand men, That, for a fantasy and trick of fame, Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot / Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause, Which is not tomb enough and continent / To hide the slain?” in *How All Occasions Do Inform Against Me*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

stage in the late 1930s. Actors were rapidly transplanting to Los Angeles to pursue the more glamorous and well-paid film acting jobs. People were not willing to work for a nominal fee to do theatre in a small space masterminded by a single woman.

Because actors were being drawn away from the stage with more lucrative film roles, Le Gallienne had trouble paying her actors enough to make it worthwhile to give up film work to spend a summer in a small regional theatre and she reflected even decades later that, besides Hagen, she was not able to get a strong enough cast for her taste.⁸⁷ However, the show was full of artistic merit, much to the chagrin of some reviewers. On the subject of the Le Gallienne *Hamlet*, Boston critic Elinor Hughes noted that “it was not that the occasion proved a bore, but that the production seemed so to change the quality of the play that it made for a rather uncomfortable evening.”⁸⁸ Le Gallienne’s *Hamlet* did not allow passivity from her audience, much like Bernhardt’s. Bernhardt’s Parisian *Hamlet* was literally riotously popular because it was so different from any other French *Hamlet*, Le Gallienne’s *Hamlet* was panned for the same reason. People came to the productions to see these women perform the role. However, people went to see Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* to see the great actress, they went to Le Gallienne’s *Hamlet* to see the great lesbian, and they went to Fastabend’s to see the great play.

Although intensely different people from different eras, Bernhardt and Le Gallienne’s Hamlets and careers were not so different. “Though their public personalities seemed so diametrically opposed, for Sarah appeared to flamboyant and Eva seemed the quiet lady, both

⁸⁷ *With a Quiet Heart*, 117.

⁸⁸ Elinor Hughes, “Miss Le Gallienne Gives First Woman Hamlet of 20th Century,” *The Boston Herald*, August 29, 1937.

were basically entrepreneurial personalities.”⁸⁹ Their childhoods were not so diametrically opposed. They were both raised by industrious, active, and visible single mothers in Paris, France. They were both given a lot of time alone as children with large age gaps with their siblings, and became accustomed to making their own decisions. They were both very active women and participated in diverse activities within theatre, preferring to have complete control over their projects—going so far as to direct, design, produce, and star in their productions. Le Gallinne’s apartment was immediately above the Civic Repertory Theatre. A day’s routine for Eva involved “daily rehearsal from noon to five or five-thirty...immediately after rehearsal [she] had dinner, and then slept for an hour before going town to [perform]. After the performance [she] usually had a few people up to supper for informal conferences—actors, authors, or scenic-designers. These sessions usually lasted till around two am.”⁹⁰ Le Gallienne modeled this system on the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt, who also literally lived in her theatre in order to maximize her time. These powerful women were drawn to Hamlet because of the historical importance and rewarding nature of the role, but also because of their dedication and ambition.

These women were singular for their respective eras. Although they operated in cultures that facilitated women running their own theatre companies, it was not standard nor expected—even less so that they would be playing roles usually reserved for the most advanced male actors. Responses from actors such as Richard Wagner who rejected the offer of Le Gallienne’s Laertes suggest that a woman assuming the role of Hamlet was viewed as a lost opportunity for them to play the part, rather than a celebration of an excellent performer at the peak of their craft.

⁸⁹ Tumbleson, 279.

⁹⁰ Le Gallienne, *With a Quiet Heart*, 54-55.

Gendered separations were breaking in the early 20th century. Bernhardt did not appear to receive this backlash of casting from prospective male actors that Le Gallienne did, which suggests that gendered performance became stricter as the century progressed, possibly as a reaction both to contemporary social politics and the rise of Stanislavskian and Checkovian performance ideals of reality.

Bernhardt and Le Gallienne, as queer performers, were drawn to the role of Hamlet as a character in conflict with society. This resonated with women who were outside of conventional society and struggling to be a part of it. Playing a role not intended for your type is an act of defiance, and in the case of Bernhardt and Le Gallienne as Hamlet, can be interpreted as feminist. It is a feminist act to create space for oneself to do something thought to be impossible because of gendered restrictions—it is an exercise in intellectual equality. To take the unplayable language of Hamlet and create a venue for performance, these women can be considered theatrical feminists.

A female Hamlet can force a complacent or even jaded audience member familiar with *Hamlet* to look at the play anew, however the change in gender is not the only element of production that stabilized these productions as excellent interpretations of the classic text. These women had dramaturgical minds. They were brilliantly intelligent and their *Hamlets* reflected their insight and creativity as well as their industry and ambition. All knew the text and criticism very well. Their creative independence created a singular vision of their productions driven by these qualities that made them such excellent theatre artists.

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