

2024 Study Guide

The show is 55 minutes long with a Community Conversation to be held at the end.



The four elements of earth, water, air and fire, used in alchemical transformations.

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What is Alchemy?

Alchemy is an ancient practice and/or philosophy that focused on the idea of transformation.

One aim of alchemy dealt with the act of transmuting one element into something entirely new, such as turning lead into gold.

Another aim of alchemy was concerned with the perfecting and transformation of the body and soul.

It was historically practiced in China, Egypt, India, and Europe.

A modern alchemy scholar was Carl Jung (1875—1961), a psychiatrist, who believed alchemy could be used as a way to understand a person's unconscious mind.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero is an alchemist. His servants, Ariel and Caliban, represent alchemical elements: Ariel as Fire and Air and Caliban as Earth and Water.



Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender

by Lisa Wolpe



Lisa Wolpe

Lisa Wolpe

She is an advocate for LGBTQIA++ causes and for inclusion.

She founded the all-female, multi-cultural Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company in 1993 and was its Producing Artistic Director until 2016.

She has arguably played more male Shakespeare roles than any other woman.

The first play she remembers seeing was *Snow White* when she was 8 years old. Her family was living in the Canary Islands, so the play was all in Spanish.

Her works will be archived at the Shakespeare Institute located in Stratford-upon-Avon.

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Charlotte and Susan Cushman as *Romeo and Juliet*, Wikimedia Commons

Women Performing Shakespeare

During Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to perform on England's public stages. All roles were played by men and boys. More on this topic can be found here and elsewhere:

<https://www.writerstheatre.org/blog/gender-shakespeare-stage-history/>
<https://source.colostate.edu/why-werent-women-allowed-to-act-in-shakespeares-plays/>

“ALCHEMY IS NOT MERELY A METAPHOR, THERE IS PRACTICAL MAGIC INVOLVED. ITS THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOMETHING DARK INTO SOMETHING LIGHTER. FEAR INTO COMPASSION. ANGER INTO FORGIVENESS.”



BEFORE THE PLAY

One Person Plays

Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender is a one-person play. More research about one-person shows can be found at these websites and others:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solo_performance#Traits_of_solo_performance

<https://www.musicaexpert.org/what-is-a-one-person-show.htm>

Hamlet

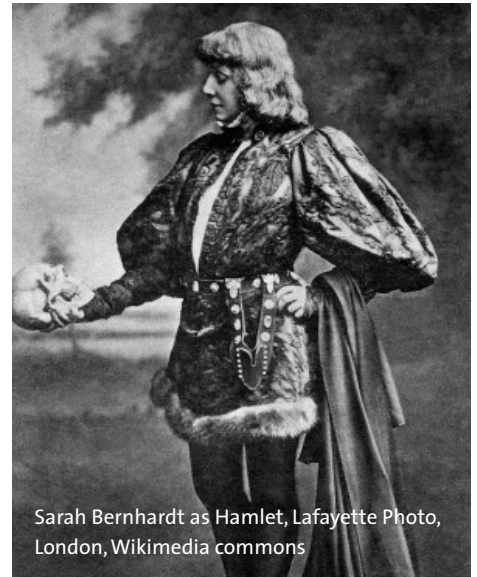
Research Hamlet’s “To Be or Not To Be” soliloquy. This and other websites provide information:

<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/3/1/>

AFTER THE PLAY

1. What is the meaning of the play’s title, *Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender*? What role does alchemy play for the central character? What role does gender play? Shakespeare?
2. What are some examples of transformations mentioned in the play? What is the deeper value of these transformations? How is the central character transformed by the end of the play?
3. Refer to your research on one-person plays: What characteristics of a one-person play did you see in the performance? How do they compare to what you would see in an ensemble play, with many actors? Why does this piece best work as a one-person show?

Lisa Wolpe as Jason in OSF’s *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Cinderella*; Poliina in *The Seagull*; Jason in *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Cinderella*. Photos by Jenny Graham.



Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet, Lafayette Photo, London, Wikimedia commons



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