Women and English Renaissance Drama: Making and Unmaking ‘The All-Male Stage’

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Abstract

We can no longer refer to ‘the all-male stage’ of Renaissance drama without a qualifying remark about the many performing women of early modern England. Over the past decade or so the combined efforts of feminism, gender studies and historicised archival work have shown that Shakespearean theatre was by no means an all-male pursuit in which women were represented only by transvestite boy actors. Recent research has uncovered a diverse and energetic range of female performers beyond the single-sex playhouse stages of Shakespearean London and has shown women to have a crucial role in early modern theatre. This article considers how the emergence of the woman player as a subject of study has changed the way that we think and write about Shakespearean drama. In particular, women’s performance challenges the central critical paradigms of ‘the all-male’ and ‘the English stage’, while the plays of Shakespeare, Jonson and other canonical authors are changed by our new understanding of women’s theatricality.

Early modern theater was never the exclusive property of the male professionals. (Brown and Parolin 4)

By this time it is clear that we do not at all know what the rule is. Obviously our evidence does not support any blanket claim that women were excluded from the stages of Renaissance England, but it may certainly indicate that the culture, and the history that descends from it, had an interest in rendering them unnoticeable. (Orgel 8–9)

It will no longer do to refer to ‘the Renaissance all-male stage’ without a qualifying remark about the many women who performed in early modern England. Conversely, though, anyone wishing to point out that early modern English theatre was not an all-male pursuit has customarily had to qualify that statement with a definition of Renaissance theatre which extends beyond the stages of the private and public playhouses, the preserves of canonical drama and the male player. And indeed, from recent work on female masquers, female mountebanks, ballad singers and jesters we know that women did not usually perform in those arenas (McManus, Women on the Renaissance Stage; Britland; Tomlinson, Women on Stage; Brown; Katritsky).

The conventional clarification is no doubt accurate but it hems in women’s
performance, separating it out from the seemingly more ‘central’ stages of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and keeping it away from widespread critical attention. While the importance of the male player and the texts which they performed are undeniable, I want to suggest that those productions were only one part of a broad, varied world of performance, and that Renaissance theatrical culture was populated by both men and women. To be quite clear, I will not argue that women regularly took to the boards of the open-air or hall playhouses although, as the instance of Mary Frith watching herself being played by a boy actor in Middleton and Dekker’s *Roaring Girl* from the side of the Fortune stage in 1611 suggests, they sometimes did come close and sometimes – as a further example will show – they did prevail. Instead, my point is that prior to 1660 the all-male playhouse stages were islands of single-sex performance in a sea of mixed sex theatricals and entertainments. What this means is that rather than thinking of the women who acted, spoke, sang, masqued, danced, jested and played beyond the playhouses as exceptional oddities, recent scholarship suggests that we should instead see them as central to early modern English theatre and as a vital context for an ‘all-male stage’ which, as Orgel points out above, is its own beginning to look increasingly like the exception rather than the rule (Stokes). This article will explore the critical paradigms which led to the marginalisation of women’s performance and will show how new research challenges those ideas and changes our understanding of English theatre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I begin with an instance of women’s performance at the geographical and conceptual centre of ‘the English Renaissance stage’. On 23 August 1584, the Pomeranian traveller Lupold von Wedel took a walk across the Thames to Southwark. This is his account:

There is a round building three stories high, in which are kept about a hundred large English dogs, with separate kennels for each of them. These dogs were made to fight singly with three bears, the second bear being larger than the first and the third larger than the second. After this a horse was brought in and chased by the dogs, and at last a bull, who defended himself bravely. The next was that a number of men and women came forward from a separate compartment, dancing, conversing and fighting with each other: also a man who threw some white bread among the crowd, that scrambled for it. Right over the middle of the place a rose was fixed, this rose being set on fire by a rocket: suddenly lots of apples and pears fell out of it down upon the people standing below. Whilst the people were scrambling for the apples, some rockets were made to fall down upon them out of the rose, which caused a great fright but amused the spectators. After this, rockets and other fireworks came flying out of all corners, and that was the end of the play. (Chambers 2:455)

Walking through the Southwark liberties, von Wedel toured a world of baiting, prostitution and gaming which traded in blood, bodies and chance, a world which would soon support a thriving set of open-air playhouses. It has often been noted that the Bear Garden was conceptually and
architecturally close to the public theatres that would soon spring up in this area (the Rose was built in 1587, the Swan followed in 1595, the Globe in 1599). Indeed one of the most famous mistakes in theatre history is Wenceslaus Hollar’s confusion of the names of the Bear Garden and the Globe in his *Long View of London* of 1644 (McDonald 47). We know, too, that the ideology and language of the theatre of blood which predated the conventional playhouses and stood virtually next door to them also saturated their plays (Dickey; Scott-Warren). These overlaps make von Wedel’s tourist journal important to theatrical historians. But this account of the women who entered the bear-baiting arena from what another translation of von Wedel’s manuscript calls ‘a mechanical contrivance’ to fight, dance and ‘converse’ with each other has not yet found the limelight (Nicol 63; von Klarwill 315). Touring the theatrical world of early modern London, von Wedel records a diverse culture of performance and preserves a fascinating moment of female playing at the heart of ‘the English all-male stage’.

There are many possible responses to the moment that von Wedel describes. We may be drawn away from the men and women who enter the arena by our distress for the animals involved in this spectacle. Such cannot be said to have been a general contemporary attitude towards bear-baiting. Rather, early modern audiences seem to have personified their bears, thinking of them as players in a spectacle that was in some way equivalent to theatre (Ravelhofer 288). In Ben Jonson’s play *Epicene* (1609), for instance, Captain Otter is verbally baited by his wife, Mistress Otter, who recalls famous London fighting bears, among them the wonderfully named Ned Whiting and George Stone (3.1.47). These bears, it seems, are named protagonists in the dramas of their bouts, individualised celebrities who, as the sequential movement of von Wedel’s account suggests, gain some kind of equivalency with the men and women who perform in the Bear Garden. But this equivalence may also worry a modern reader, especially since von Wedel’s description gives the clear sense that the audience, too, is fair game. In his account, those poor or competitive enough to scramble for bread and fruit are fired upon with fireworks, and von Wedel is explicit about the pleasure that seeing part of the audience baited gave those who did not need or want to jostle for food. Inside this arena, then, humans and animals are equivalent performers. The bears are players in ‘a choreographed, “theatrical” event’ (Cerasano 199; see also Dickey; Ravelhofer; Scott–Warren) alongside the men and women who, as the alternative translation puts it, ‘dance, sang and spoke’ (von Klarwill 315).

Certainly von Wedel’s matter–of–fact description of his theatrical women does not suggest that they are exceptional. Quite the contrary, they are just one in a series of spectacles, and not even the one he finds most exciting. He simply accepts and notes their presence. But the question most likely to confront those trying to make a case for female performance is, how do we know that these performers were really women? In some ways this is fair enough: it is important to consider the possibility that the ‘women’ could
be transvestite male or boy actors. If that were the case, though, we might expect a visitor touring a new theatrical culture, like von Wedel, to comment on any transvestism that he witnessed. Instead, another translation of his account replaces ‘men and women’ with the more biologically exact terms ‘male and female’ (von Klarwill 315). In these circumstances, perhaps, we can be fairly confident that these were not cross-dressed males but women. But the idea of ‘women’ performers does not merely reflect a hostile scepticism of the possibility of female players. Certain records or performance accounts do in fact describe ‘women’ in the absence of any female players, troping transvestite male performers as ‘theatrical women’ for a particular ideological purpose. Courtly texts like John Harington’s celebrated account of the drunken entertainment of James I and Christian IV at Theobalds (1606) or Ben Jonson’s published account of his Masque of Queens (1609) figure the theatrical Englishwoman as a sign of royal shame or authority, depending on whether the author wished to criticise or praise the monarchy (McManus, ‘Jacobean Fantasies of Female Performance’). So the effects of rhetorical shaping and the possibility of textual transvestism must be given due consideration. That Harington and Jonson can trope men as the ‘theatrical woman’, of course, speaks to the fact that female performance was current enough to be invoked by the authors, and imagined and understood by their intended readers. In this case, though, once these possibilities have been considered and discounted, von Wedel’s description of ‘females’ or ‘women’ can be taken at face value.

So the men, women and animals of the Bear Garden mingle together, their equivalency as performers at its clearest when certain audience members make a dash for free food. And yet, in spite of the efforts of many scholars over the past decades, it is probably still not an exaggeration to say that more time has been given to discussing whether bears would be moved into the adjacent playhouses to perform in Mucedorus or The Winter’s Tale than has been devoted to thinking about the nature of women’s contribution to the city stages or to performance more generally (Ravelhofer 297–318; Coghill 34–5). The all-important question of how an audience’s experience of ‘the all-male stage’ might have been changed by their understanding of the women who danced, fought and spoke just next door has only recently become a plausible topic for those working on early modern theatre. But the similarities between the ‘dancing, conversing and fighting’ women of the Bear Garden and the players who would soon recite lines, dance jigs and act out fight scenes on the surrounding open-air stages show how it would be false to impose too definite a division between them. That said, the crucial distinction between the performers of bear garden and playhouse is clear: the playhouses stand out from their competitors because their stages held only men and boys. Is it not, then, possible – indeed likely – that someone who had paid to see the Bear Garden performers (dogs, bears, horses, oxen, men, women, and spectators all) might be struck on entering the open air playhouse by its single-minded focus on one kind of performer
– the male player? Following this logic, is it not ‘the all-male stage’ which is the real anomaly, the exception rather than the theatrical rule?

This example of women’s performance has been widely available in E. K. Chambers’s important collection for nearly a hundred years, and the fact that it has made only a limited impact on our thinking about early modern theatre speaks to the power of the idea of ‘the all-male stage’. This hard-working critical construct has long been central to the thought of those who read, teach and mediate Renaissance culture. In addition to multiple assertions in textbooks and stage histories, the paradigm has seeped into popular consciousness: the film Shakespeare in Love (dir. John Madden, 1998) is based on the premise that because women could not act on the public theatre stage they could not act at all and on the mistaken assumption that they were barred from the stage by law rather than by custom. Indeed, the idea’s power is clear from the fact that it is necessary to make a case for reading both women and bears as performers: for a long time, the paradigm of ‘the all-male stage’ made the idea of a performing English woman as bizarre as that of a performing animal. Regardless, von Wedel documents popular theatricals which show women already at the heart of performance in London at the very place and time of the conception of the Renaissance stage.

As I have already suggested, von Wedel’s women are far from isolated examples. Recent scholarship has discovered a vast range and number of English theatrical women and has amassed evidence of the sheer expansiveness and breadth of early modern theatrical culture and of women’s involvement in this proliferation of performance modes and genres. So, in contrast to the assumption that the transvestite boy actor of the public and private theatre companies almost wholly substituted for women, there were in fact many routes into theatrical engagement for the early modern Englishwoman. Female dramatists such as Mary Wroth, Margaret Cavendish and Elizabeth Cary are now much-studied and often-taught. But women also danced or sung on both an amateur and professional basis. In addition to their expressive – though silent – masquing in the courts of Anna of Denmark (wife of James VI and I) and Henrietta Maria (wife of Charles I), women also appeared as professional musicians and singers: to list only a few, Catherine Coleman sung the lead role of Ianthe in William Davenant’s Siege of Rhodes in 1646; in 1632 one Madame Coniack sang the part of Circe in Aurelian Townshend’s masque Tempe Restored (Britland 90–110; Tomlinson, Women on Stage 50–4); and, from Europe, we also have a curriculum vitae of sorts which an Italian singer named Luisa Sances sent to the French court when she was looking for work in 1644 (Prunières 58). Beyond the elite world of the courts, women were street performers, ballad sellers, mountebanks selling both ‘medicine’ and diversion, and they performed in pageants, civic entries, and aristocratic house plays and entertainments. That this was widespread rather than sporadic is attested to by a glance at evidence unearthed by the Records of Early English Drama.
volumes. The Norwich *REED* volume alone documents female pageant performers who took speaking parts in 1556 and performed in the silent pageant of weavers for Elizabeth I in 1578; there is also evidence of a female ballad seller (1605); of one ‘Ciprian de Roson’ and his wife who were licensed to ‘shew [forth] feates of actiuity together with A beast Called an Elke’ (1614); and, in 1616, of French players who brought with them a female rope-dancer (Galloway 41–3, 255, 126, 142, 150).

On a slightly different note, our view of theatre as a male business is also changing as the extent to which women worked for the theatre becomes clear. As Natasha Korda has shown, women’s work supported the London theatres either through a direct connection with performance, such as the Italian woman who dressed the wigs and hair of the boy actors playing in court performances at Hampton Court in 1573/4, or through their labour in the economic spheres that surrounded the commercial institutions of the playhouses, such as the linen or pawnbroking trades (Korda 212–13). What is more, England itself was a theatrical space through which plays, players, and companies moved, and travelling theatrical women were part of the landscape: touring theatre companies from France and Italy performed in England, bringing actresses with them and disseminating the idea of the theatrical woman (Chambers 2:262; Richards and Richards 262–3). In the light of all of this, it becomes clear that when we focus only on the canonical ‘all-male stage’, we follow a self-fulfilling argument of canonicity, of assumed quality over quantity, in which we look at what is considered ‘good’ because we ourselves have deemed those productions to be ‘good’. This position was long ago rejected in studies of early modern women’s writing and needs to be challenged in work on early modern women’s performance. So when the theatrical woman was so various and numerous, when in fact only certain stages or performance genres needed boys to take female roles, and when those male bodies did not ‘vanis[h] to consciousness’ but were rather emphasised by the performing female bodies that surrounded them (Brown and Parolin 7), might we ask why it is that we can we recognise these women at this moment in scholarship when we could not before? This question opens up the related ideas of ‘the English’ and ‘the all-male’ stage, and asks us to consider what happens to each of these critical models when we take female performance seriously.

As the history of von Wedel’s account shows, simply knowing about such materials is by no means the end of the story: the fact of the matter is that the evidence of female performance has long been before our eyes. But certain dominant critical paradigms, in particular the concepts of ‘the all-male’ and ‘the English stage’, have hidden the early modern performing woman in plain sight. It makes sense, then, that the inclusion of women in the history of the English theatre challenges those very paradigms, and that the effects of this rewriting reach beyond any ghettoised notion of ‘gender studies’ to alter our very conceptions of early modern English theatre. In particular, I want to unpack the concepts hidden inside the related paradigms.
of ‘the all-male stage’ and ‘the English stage’ and suggest how ideas of
Englishness and masculinity – national and gendered identities – interact in
the shaping of the critical conception of English Renaissance theatre, an
interaction of patriarchy and anglocentricism which has greatly influenced
scholarly understanding of the Renaissance stage.

My next example has been much-used in discussions of women’s
performance. In particular, in a section of Impersonations just preceding the
quotation which heads this article, Stephen Orgel uses this incident as a
prominent example of scholarship’s cultural conditioning when it comes to
thinking about women’s role in early modern theatre (7). On 8 November
1629, one Thomas Brande wrote about a moment when women did indeed
perform inside the city playhouses of Caroline London:

last daye certaine vagrant French players, who had beeue expelled from their
owne contrey, and these women, did attempt, thereby giving just offence to all
vertuous and well-disposed persons in this town, to act a certain lacivious and
unchaste comedye, in the French tongue at the Blackfryers. Glad I am to saye
they were hissed, hooted, and pippen-pelted from the stage, so as I do not thinke
they will soone be ready to trie the same againe. – Whether they had licence for
so doing I know not; but I do know that, if they had licence, it were fit that the
Master [of the Revels] be called to account for the same. (Bentley 1:25)

Expelled from France, the troupe are depicted as vagrants who bring with
them the seemingly intractable threat of the actress. The response of the
Blackfriars audience was read through most of the twentieth century as
supporting a general embargo on performing women, backing up the sense
that an English audience simply would not have tolerated their presence.
However, we cannot assume that a good pelting with fruit was the only
reaction to the French actresses. We also cannot now follow the eminent
theatre historian Allardyce Nicol who wrote of the public and private stages
in 1925 (two years after Chambers made available von Wedel’s account of
the women in the Bear Garden), that ‘the actors were all men or boys’. Nicoldoes then provide a footnote acknowledging Brande’s Frenchwomen
as the exception to the rule: ‘French actresses made an appearance in London
about 1625 [sic], but were hissed out of town’ (109–10). But this footnote,
in effect, creates the rule of all-male performance through this apparently
exceptional moment of female intrusion. In the same way, the rejection of
these foreign actresses by the theatre audience makes it seem unlikely that
the English would have tolerated female performance outside the playhouses
when they could not stomach it inside, and so the private and public
playhouses are enshrined and the vibrant context of women’s playing and
performance which surrounded those spaces slips from sight.

As befits a scholar of his reputation, Nicol chooses his words carefully in
his treatment of this episode. In particular, he distinguishes the French
‘actresses’ from the male, English actors who – in his model – properly
inhabit the London stage. And indeed, terminology is crucial here. If we
take the term ‘actor’ to describe the activities of male performers on the
private, public or university stages, that is, to describe men assuming or impersonating identities other than their own, then Nicol’s statement is entirely accurate. Indeed, many of the theatricals in which women performed beyond the playhouses differed importantly from conventional acting. Some demanded no such loss or concealment of identity: masquing, or ‘personation’, for instance, depended for its success upon the recognition of the noble masquer. Some avoided speech, as in the silent pageants accompanying the Lord Mayor which von Wedel watched in 1584/5 (von Klarwill 327). Some, such as ballad-selling, mountebank shows or joke-telling, involved performance under commercial or social guises. Given this, the term ‘actor’ does not strictly apply to most female performers, and can be used to distinguish the single-sex playhouse stages from the teeming, vibrant theatrical world which surrounded them. English female performers are not called ‘actresses’. Indeed, for much of the period under discussion there was no concept of an English ‘actress’ as we would know it. Sophie Tomlinson notes that the term was first used ‘with the sense of “a female player on the stage”’ only in 1626. The occasion was the performance of Queen Henrietta Maria (wife of Charles I) at court in a French pastoral in which some of the Queen’s ladies took on male roles and prosthetic beards (Tomlinson, ‘Henrietta Maria’ 189). The category, then, emerged during the Caroline period as a result of the courtly activities of such women as Henrietta Maria, and through the influence of performing women like the ‘pippen-pelted’ French actresses. Of course, this does not mean that there were no performing women in England prior to these milestones or to the coining of ‘actress’. It does mean, though, that we should not restrict our search for women’s theatricality only to activities roughly equivalent to those of the male player. As so much work on early modern women’s theatricality tells us, if we look for an ‘actress’ to set beside the actor or if we focus only on performers who made it on to the playhouse stages, we will find only exceptions to a rule that we ourselves have constructed. If we look instead for theatrical or performing women, we will find multiple examples from within a broader definition of performance which is more faithful to the nature of early modern theatricality. We will find, too, that these performers (Brown and Parolin call them ‘women players’) were indeed tolerated if not embraced by English audiences. In using ‘actress’, Nicol distinguishes the Frenchwomen on the Blackfriars stage from their English counterparts who, because they do not appear on a conventional stage, are not called ‘actresses’ and do not take part in spoken or scripted drama, disappear from critical view. So while Nicol is correct to write that ‘the actors were all men or boys’, his statement depends upon a radically narrowed critical range – challenging this narrowness allows a different history of the English theatre to emerge.

The episode that Thomas Brande reports with such vitriol allows us to see the important connections between ideas of nation and gender in studies of early modern theatre. Nicol’s footnoted remark that the actresses were
'hissed out of town' contains an interesting elision. Stephen Orgel has shown that, although the actresses were indeed sent 'pippen-pelted' from the Blackfriars stage, they did not leave London, but in fact also played at the Red Bull and the Fortune (7). In the light of this, and of the vast range of women’s performance beyond the playhouses, the expulsion of these actresses from the Blackfriars begins to look more like an isolated incident rather than a wholesale rejection of theatrical women. Indeed, it may not even have been that: Orgel also mentions an account by William Prynne, who, equally as outraged as Brande and just as invested in the single-sex stage, claims that the Blackfriars performance in fact drew crowds (7). Though this archival material may well not have been available to Nicol, he nonetheless constructs a metonymic relationship between the public stage and the metropolis, and so by extension the nation: in this logic, to drum the actresses off the Blackfriars stage is to drum them out of the city, is to drum them out of the country. Nicol’s treatment of this particular moment is a good example of the way in which ideas of stage, gender and nation are entangled in much theatre criticism.

The figure of the foreign actress is central in unpacking these converging discourses. Though the actresses of 1629 were by no means hounded out of London, Sophie Tomlinson explains Brande’s vengeful reaction to their Blackfriars performance when she points out that the very idea of the seventeenth-century actress is ‘stamped in the public mind as a continental phenomenon’ (Tomlinson, ‘Henrietta Maria’ 195). The figure of the foreign actress conflates ideas of nation and gender in a single threatening image of non-English femininity, an image which had made itself felt in earlier performances such as that of Queen Anna of Denmark as a black-faced Daughter of Niger in Ben Jonson’s 1605 *Masque of Blackness* or in John Harington’s invocation of the Queen of Sheba as the excessive foreign woman in the Theobalds letter of 1606. It is perhaps in this image of the foreign actress that we can see how the twentieth-century paradigms of ‘the all-male stage’ and ‘the English stage’ are linked, how they developed from particular responses to Renaissance rhetoric about the female performer, and how they have created a restricted vision of the Renaissance stage.

The threat of the foreign actress is one of boundaries broken and borders crossed, a fear of a lack of integrity. Indeed it is partly in the threat of their breach by this figure that these borders and boundaries are fully established. The seemingly disconnected concepts of a patriarchal single-sex stage and an anglocentric national stage in fact operate along similar conceptual lines. Both are totalising and both construct unified theatrical monoliths which operate by excluding difference. So ‘the all-male stage’ excludes women, while ‘the English stage’ excludes the foreign. English Renaissance theatre, the argument goes, is radically different from other forms of theatre: it is unique because it is an all-male stage; it is an all-male stage because it is uniquely English. Women, by definition then, do not belong in a history of English theatre and the result of this is that the public
and private playhouses become the privileged focus of critical attention. The foreign actress, vilified in Renaissance rhetoric, has been used in criticism to create a similar focus upon the unique and the exceptional, the woman who proves the rule of ‘the all-male stage’ and whose relatively high profile in the history of English theatre conceals the vast range of domestic theatrical women who operated beyond those stages.

The task of writing the history of early modern English women’s performance, then, is also the task of rewriting the history of early modern English theatre itself. This new history is emerging through archival research, and a willingness to look beyond only conventional literary sources into the vast range of material (eye-witness accounts, letters, financial records, occasional poems, costume and scenic designs, musical scores, portraiture, dance steps and architecture, to name but some) that document the ways in which early modern women engaged with performance and theatricality. What is more, and as I have tried to suggest above, in order to understand the role of women in English theatre we have to re-imagine our concept of that theatre: for ‘theatre’ we now read ‘performance’, a broader and more diverse practice which encompasses a range of forms such as dance, music, song, pageantry (both civic and royal), oratory, secular and religious performance, university and school performances, closet drama and jesting. The study of early modern female theatricality, then, is by definition historicised, but it also seems necessarily interdisciplinary. This is not as fashionable a term now as it was even a decade ago, but it is no coincidence that an interest in women’s performance coincided with both the shift from theatre history to performance studies which I have just outlined and the rise of interdisciplinarity in many universities.

Future scholarship also needs to be willing to engage with the continental forms and practices that influenced English theatre. Unpicking the mutual influences of Europe and England would restore theatre’s essential transnationality, a sense of it as an intrinsically migrant, mobile form, and this would help relieve the splendid isolation in which English drama sometimes still sits. So English and European theatrical women must be explored in all their guises: the divas of the commedia and the emerging opera, the performers of pageantry and masquing, the work of elite women in avant-garde writing, performance and commissioning, and the work of professional dancers, musicians and singers. As this implies, the difference that social status makes and the meaning of the divide between professional and amateur performers will be crucial.

Just as important, though, is the reinterpretation of canonical drama as part of a vibrant world of mixed-sex theatricality. As a few examples of current and recent work will show, familiar plays look very different when female theatricality is given its due. To start at the very centre of the canon, Ophelia’s insanity in *Hamlet* shares many features with the late sixteenth-century *La Pazzia d’Isabella*, the mad scene which was the *tour de force* of the famous Italian commedia actress Isabella Andreini (Nicholson;
Richards and Richards 43–6). Such pervasive connections between continental and English tropes and practices, and the extent to which ‘continental female performers invaded the English stage via . . . provocative female characters’ (Campbell 145) are further hinted at in Julie Campbell’s discussion of the French noblewomen of Marguerite de Valois’ esquadron volant who stand behind the courtly female characters of Love’s Labour’s Lost and in Peter Parolin’s reading of the influence of the Italian actress on Jonson’s Volpone (Parolin). Domestically speaking, popular female performance and traditions of sanctioned ‘female satire’ in particular influence the depiction of Paulina, the ‘mankind witch’ (2.3.68) and guiding spirit of the final scenes of The Winter’s Tale, while plays as diverse as The Comedy of Errors, Othello and The Alchemist bear the marks of female jesting (Brown 195–7). The depiction of theatrical women is not always, or even often, sympathetic: the elite women of the Jacobean court are comprehensively lampooned in the Collegiates of Jonson’s 1609 Epicene, in which he satirises the ‘powerful female patrons’ of the Jacobean court who had danced in his Masque of Queens in the same year (Dutton 17, 21–3). Sympathy aside, current work nevertheless reveals the part that women’s performance played in shaping the seventeenth-century stage: Sophie Tomlinson documents the impact of the court actresses on Jonson’s and Shirley’s Caroline comedies and into the Restoration (Tomlinson, Women on Stage 79–117). The effects of reinstating women into the history of English theatricality are broad and deep: one consequence is the continued rethinking of the dramatic canon, and the need to expand the range of plays available to students and researchers. This is the impetus behind Three Seventeenth-Century Plays on Women and Performance, a new edition which reads Fletcher’s Wild Goose Chase (1621), Shirley’s Bird in a Cage (1633) and Cavendish’s Convent of Pleasure (1668) through seventeenth-century feminine theatricality and suggests ways in which this context moulds the development of early modern drama and our reading of it (Chalmers, Sanders and Tomlinson). In this ongoing reformation of the dramatic canon can be found the effects of the serious consideration of women as subjects and agents of drama. The plays which we have so long read as the product of ‘the English all-male stage’ in fact emerge from a very different theatrical world. The writing of its history is under way.

Short Biography

Clare McManus works on early modern theatre, women’s theatricality, and the intersections between touring theatre and nation formation in the seventeenth century. Her monograph, Women on the Renaissance State: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court (2002) explores women’s performance in dance, costume and scenery in the Jacobean court masque. She has pursued those interests further in an edited collection, Women and Culture at the Courts of the Stuart Queens (2003), and recently
co-edited an anthology of criticism on the early modern period, *Reconceiving the Renaissance: A Critical Reader* (2005). She is currently editing John Fletcher’s *Island Princess* for Arden Early Modern Drama. McManus has held fellowships at the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Huntington Library, and taught at various institutions before joining the English Literature programme at Roehampton University, London. She holds an MA (Hons) from the University of Edinburgh and an MA and PhD in English and European Renaissance Drama from the University of Warwick.

**Note**

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