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‘We have this day, expell’d our Men the Stage’: Dating the Prologue and Epilogue of *The Parson’s Wedding*

*Scholars of Restoration theatre have given contradictory accounts as to which all-female production of Thomas Killigrew’s *The Parson’s Wedding* the existing prologue and epilogue belong to. This note argues that out of the two productions in the Restoration period — the first of which took place in October 1664 and the second in June 1672 — the surviving prologue and epilogue were most likely written for the second production. Combining evidence gathered from historical records with textual analysis, this note is the first study to comprehensively investigate this conundrum.*

In the most recent essay to date on the all-female productions of Thomas Killigrew’s *The Parson’s Wedding*, Victoria Bancroft locates unequivocally the year and the production in which the prologue to the play was spoken: ‘In the Prologue to the first performance in October 1664, Rebecca Marshall, in the leading role of the Captain, delivers a rebuke to the male actors.’¹ The matter of determining to which production the prologue and epilogue belonged, however, is more complex than Bancroft suggests; and whether they did indeed belong to the 1664 production is far from certain.² As of yet, no scholarly work has fully investigated which production they were written for. Close attention to the performance calendar as well as in-depth analysis of both the prologue and the epilogue demonstrate that they were most certainly written specifically for the 1672 production of *The Parson’s Wedding*.

There are two known productions of *The Parson’s Wedding* during the Restoration. The first was mounted in October 1664. Samuel Pepys wrote excitedly in his diary on 11 October 1664 when he dined with an under-clerk of the council of state, Peter Llewellyn: ‘Luellin tells me what a bawdy loose play this “Parson’s Wedding” is, that is acted by nothing but women

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at the King's house'.³ A German spectator, Ferdinand Albrecht, also saw the same play about a week prior to Llewellyn's visit to the King's Company playhouse on 5 October 1664. His account of the performance confirms that the play's controversial casting was a huge success: 'acted by women, some of whom, wearing men's clothes, performed the male roles so well that His Majesty let all the money be given to them alone'.⁴ The play did not appear in print until Henry Herringman published it in 1664 as part of a collection of Thomas Killigrew's works.⁵ Crucially, however, the collection did not contain either the prologue or the epilogue of *The Parson's Wedding*. Only after the second production, which was mounted sometime in June 1672, were the prologue and the epilogue to *The Parson's Wedding* printed as part of a pamphlet entitled the *Covent Garden Drollery, or A collection [sic] of all the choice songs, poems, prologues and epilogues, (sung and spoken at courts and theatres) never in print before*.⁶

Both the prologue and epilogue spoken by Marshall exist among the compilation for the all-female revival of *Philaster* by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher in June 1672. In fact, the summer of 1672 saw a series of all-female productions mounted by the King's Company. Apart from *The Parson's Wedding* and *Philaster*, John Dryden's *Secret Love* was revived with an all-female cast in June or July 1672. A prologue for an unknown play, probably belonging to the same time, also survives; it was written by Dryden 'for the Women, when they Acted at the Old Theatre Lincolns-Inn-Fields'.⁷ Similarly, an 'Epilogue by a Woman' printed by Thomas Duffett, the King's Company's playwright, strongly suggests yet another production that was acted by women only.⁸

Not only are the all-female productions recorded as being mounted around the same month, but the subject matter of the prologues and epilogues is also remarkably similar. Compare, for instance, the prologues and the epilogues of *The Parson's Wedding* and *Secret Love*. Both talk of women performers as having thespian gifts and technical accomplishments equal to their male counterparts. Anne Reeves speaks in the epilogue to *Secret Love*: 'What think you Sirs, was't not all well enough, / Will you not grant that we can strut, and huff. / Men may be proud, but faith for ought I see, / They neither walk, nor cock, so well as we'.⁹ The epilogue to *The Parson's Wedding* closely mirrors these sentiments as Rebecca Marshall defies the audience: 'Why cannot we as well perform their [men's] Parts?'¹⁰ The epilogues likewise suggest independently setting up an all-female house. Reeves, in the epilogue to *Secret Love*, prays for this outcome by saying: 'Oh would the higher Powers be kind to us,

/ And grant us to set up a female house'.¹¹ The last two lines in the epilogue to *The Parson's Wedding* echo the same idea: 'We'll [actresses] build up a new Theatre to gain you [audience], / And turn this [Lincoln's Inn Fields] to a House to entertain you'.¹² The two productions also bitterly complain that the King's Company's actors are old and worthless. Reeves lambasts the male players: 'whence are men so necessary grown? / Our's are so old, they are as good as none', while Marshall in the prologue to *The Parson's Wedding* similarly rebukes them as being 'impotent, and old'.¹³

Placing the prologue to *The Parson's Wedding* within the context of the King's Company's performance history proves revealing. The prologue is worth quoting at length:

After so many sad complaints to us,
The painful labouring Woman of this house
We with our Poet have prevail'd again,
To give us our Revenge upon the men.
...
'Twas not our crime, the house so long lay still;
When e'er we play not, 'tis against our will.
We could have acted, could but they have joyn'd,
...
And now they quarrel, when they cannot play.
'Twas somewhat better when they did agree,
'Twas old but 'twas a willing company. (Prologue, 1–4, 7–9, 12–14)

The prologue importantly alludes to 'the house' having had to 'so long lay still'. This detail suggests that the King's Company was not operating for a considerable time before the production of *The Parson's Wedding*. The performance calendar, as recorded in the *London Stage*, shows the King's Company busily mounting plays right up until the first production of *The Parson's Wedding* on 5 October 1664. In the previous month the King's Company produced *The Rivals* followed by a succession of performances of *The Generall*.¹⁴ The latter was, in fact, mounted for a third time just a day before the first performance of *The Parson's Wedding*. This activity contrasts starkly with the performance records of the King's Company just before the 1672 revival of *The Parson's Wedding*. The only recorded production in May 1672 was the one performance of *The History of Charles the Eighth of France*.¹⁵ The extreme dearth of performances in May 1672 means that the King's Company could easily have been closed for about four weeks prior to opening its

doors again in June to a series of all-female performances. The dismal number of performances prior to the production in June 1672 thus conforms to the timeline of the actresses' protestations in the prologue.

Marshall's nostalgia, furthermore, for what the company was like in the past, as evinced in the line "'Twas old but 'twas a willing company', would be an odd remark indeed if it had been spoken in 1664, only four years after the King's Company was established. Interestingly, Marshall also relates how the actresses colluded with Thomas Killigrew — dubbed here as 'our Poet' — and 'prevail'd again' to exact revenge on the male players by excluding them from the stage. The only other time the same play by Killigrew was mounted with an all-female cast was in 1664.¹⁶ The reference to a successful attempt in the past, therefore, would only make logical sense if the prologue had been spoken in the 1672 production.

This note has closely traced the performance history of *The Parson's Wedding* during the Restoration from its first ever all-female production in 1664 to its second and last performance in 1672, and has argued that the prologue and epilogue of the play were written specifically for the latter. All available historical evidence, albeit circumstantial, from the prologue and epilogue only appearing in print in 1672 to the series of all-female productions in June of that year, supports this argument. The prologue and the epilogue themselves, however, provide the most compelling evidence of all. A close reading of the texts critically reveals that their contents neatly correspond with the state of affairs of the King's Company at the time. The combined use of both theatre history and textual analysis, therefore, sheds new light on one of the major conundrums of Restoration theatre.

Notes

- 1 Victoria Bancroft, 'Tradition and Innovation in *The Parson's Wedding*', Philip Major (ed.), *Thomas Killigrew and the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Farnham, 2013), 47. Lori Leigh similarly assumes that the prologue belonged to the production in 1664. See Lori Leigh, *Shakespeare and the Embodied Heroine* (Basingstoke, 2014), 85.
- 2 The earliest reference to the prologue and the epilogue of the play was made by Gerard Langbaine in 1691 when he suggested: 'This play was reviv'd at the Old Theatre, in little Lincoln's Inn fields, and acted all by Women, a new Prologue and Epilogue being spoken by Mrs Marshall [Rebecca] in Man's Cloaths'; Langbaine,

- An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (Oxford, 1691; Wing: L376), (Early English Books Online), 313. Pierre Danchin argues, nearly a century later, that while there is 'a possibility that these [prologue and epilogue] may belong to an earlier occasion [ie 1664]', the likelihood of them belonging to the production of 1672, 'is much more likely'; Danchin (ed.), *The Prologues and Epilogues of the Restoration 1660–1700*, 5 vols (Nancy, 1981–8), 2.497.
- 3 Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Robert Latham and William Matthews (eds), 11 vols (London, 1973–81), 5.294.
 - 4 Jill Bepler, *Ferdinand Albrecht, Duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg (1636–1687). A Traveller and His Travelogue* (Wiesbaden, 1988), 212.
 - 5 See Thomas Killigrew, *Comedies and Tragedies* (London, 1664).
 - 6 See *Covent Garden Drollery, or A collection [sic] of all the choice songs, poems, prologues and epilogues, (sung and spoken at courts and theatres) never in print before* (London, 1672).
 - 7 Danchin (ed.), *The Prologues and Epilogues of the Restoration 1660–1700*, 5 vols (Nancy, 1981–8), 2.495. All citations of prologues and epilogues are from this source.
 - 8 *Ibid*, 2.487.
 - 9 *Ibid*, 2.491 (Epilogue 1–4).
 - 10 *Ibid*, 2.498 (Epilogue 13).
 - 11 *Ibid*, 2.491 (Epilogue 18–19).
 - 12 *Ibid*, 2.498 (Epilogue 25–6).
 - 13 *Ibid*, 2.491 (Epilogue 10–11); 2.497 (Prologue 6).
 - 14 W. Van Lennep et al. (eds), *The London Stage, 1660–1800*, 5 vols (Carbondale, 1960–8), 1.83–4.
 - 15 See *London Stage*, 1.194–5.
 - 16 Thomas Killigrew may have planned to revise his play *Thomaso* for an all-female production in the autumn of 1664, for which there exists an intended cast list, but no evidence exists of the production ever being staged. See Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700* (Cambridge, 1992), 58.