

Thomas Matthew Vozar

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## Alcaics on Restoration Actresses by the Cambridge Classical Scholar James Duport

*This note brings attention to a neo-Latin ode in Alcaic stanzas entitled ‘In Roscias nostras, seu Histriones Feminas’ (‘On Our Roscias, or Female Actors’), which was written by the Cambridge classical scholar James Duport before 1676. A translation and commentary on the poem provide access for the first time to this learned reaction to the new cultural phenomenon in the Restoration of the professional actress.*

The introduction of women as professional actors marked a major difference between the theatrical culture of the Restoration and that of the playhouses that flourished before the civil wars. Yet the ubiquity of this practice did not ensure universal acceptance. Attitudes similar to those of William Prynne, whose attack on actresses as ‘notorious whores’ in *Histrionomastix* (1632) was interpreted as a slight against Henrietta Maria, leading to the punitive amputation of his ears, persisted over the intervening decades, and Restoration actresses often found themselves subjected to various forms of harassment and violence.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting contemporary comment on Restoration actresses that has hitherto escaped the attention of theatre historians comes in the form of a neo-Latin ode in Alcaic stanzas written by the Cambridge don James Duport.<sup>2</sup> An accomplished classical scholar, Duport published a Homeric paraphrase of Job that helped him earn the regius professorship of Greek in 1639, which he held until 1654. He taught as a fellow of Trinity College, his alma mater, for some thirty years and delivered a series of lectures on Theophrastus during the civil wars that appeared posthumously in Peter Needham’s 1712 edition of that author. In 1668 Duport ascended to the mastership of Magdalene College, a position that he held until his death in 1679, also serving a term as vice-chancellor of the university in 1669–70. In 1676 the university printer published a weighty collection of his Latin verse, predominantly epigrammatic in nature, under the title

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Silere discas, et sapere audeas,  
 Et erubescas te dare publico.  
 Sin dramatis pars esse pergas,  
 Non nisi κωφὸν ἀγὰς πρόσωπον.<sup>3</sup>

[Player is not a name for women, nor is actor, if there be credit in grammar and in Priscian; surely it is proper that only men be actors. Former times had them as long as chastity was safe, and modesty, nor had Astraea yet departed from the earth or blush from the virgin's face. Yet now, when virtue's hue goes into exile and the race of women goes shameless, behold the other sex, mingled with men, today occupies the theatre. Megaera and Tisiphone adorn the stage of the *Herod* of Heinsius, not differently from yours, and the drama trembles with the profane torches of Christian Furies. Woman has been made part of a comic play, now she makes a spectacle of herself: have you therefore, Aristophanes, also produced the *Assemblywomen* for the English theatre? Yet for how long, Roscia, do you lay aside all sense of shame? Let there at last be shame for sin, and moderation: leave the stage, put away the socks, put them away, as they fit you poorly. You should learn to be quiet, and dare to be prudent, and blush to present yourself in public. But if you insist on being part of the drama, do not play a role unless it is a silent one.]

Quite fittingly for a classical scholar, Duport's first objection is philological. Neither the Greek-derived hypocrita [player] nor the native Latin *histrion* [actor] can rightly be applied to women, both nouns being masculine: to use these words otherwise would be an offense to grammar and to the authority of the late Roman grammarian Priscian, whose *Institutiones Grammaticae* includes an extensive discussion of Latin gender.<sup>4</sup> Actresses may have been an appropriate adornment of the stage in more chaste and modest times, before Astraea's departure from the earth, but their appearance now occasions vice. The fourth stanza alludes to the controversy concerning the Dutch classical scholar Daniel Heinsius's neo-Latin tragedy *Herodes Infanticida* (1632) some decades earlier, when critics Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac and Claudius Salmasius had castigated the author for profaning his biblical drama with the presence of the pagan furies Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone.<sup>5</sup> Actresses, Duport argues, are similarly injurious to dramatic decorum.

Accusations of indecorum give way to simple mockery: the women on stage are making a spectacle of themselves. Duport wonders whether Aristophanes has presented his *Ekklesiazousai* or *Assemblywomen* — a play in which the women of

Athens take control of the government — on the English stage. Here, as throughout the ode, the classics present the paradigm by which the scholar attempts to understand the theatre. But this reference is also significant in that it hints at what may have been the experience of playgoing, or perhaps only a report of it, that prompted the composition of the poem. For Duport may well be describing a production of Edward Howard's Restoration comedy *The Six Days Adventure, or, The New Utopia*, which like the *Ekklesiazousai* of Aristophanes depicts a government of women.<sup>6</sup>

The first recorded performance of *The Six Days Adventure* dates to 6 March 1671 at Lincoln's Inn Fields Playhouse, featuring the Duke's Company actresses Mary Saunderson Betterton, Anne Shadwell (née Gibbs), Jane Long, Mary Lee (née Aldridge), and Elinor Dixon (later Lee) in the named female roles,<sup>7</sup> and the text was published the same year. *The New Utopia* was a total flop: the jeers of the audience were so persistent as to prevent the players from properly executing their roles, such that one of the commendatory — perhaps better to say consolatory — epigrams to the author at the front of the book is entitled 'On the Miscarriage of his Play in Acting'. (Another, notably, was contributed by Aphra Behn.) In his highly defensive preface Howard remarks on 'the disturbance of the Actors in the Representation of this Play', with the result that the audience 'could not with any quiet give their attention to the Action', conceding that 'it could not be other than imperfectly perform'd by the Actors, who finding the Play abusively treated, were apt enough to neglect that diligence required to their parts'.<sup>8</sup> *The New Utopia* must have been a poor showcase for the talents of its players, male and female alike, and Duport's verses could be seen as offering a learned parallel to the scorn of the disgruntled crowd of spectators. But whether Duport was in fact responding to this specific play or not, the contrast between such different appropriations of the Aristophanic theme is instructive.

Duport's Latin ode closes with a flourish of Greek that nevertheless encodes a most vernacular patriarchal sentiment. Commanding one Roscia to leave the stage and remove her socci, the footwear of comedy, Duport advises her to keep quiet: Horace's *sapere aude* [dare to know], which Kant would later claim as the motto of the Enlightenment, is here appropriated as an injunction to learn one's place as a woman.<sup>9</sup> If Roscia must be part of the drama, she should only take on a role (πρόσωπον) that is mute or unspeaking (κωφόν). If this was once epigrammatic wit, its humour is lost on us now. But what Duport's Alcaics do present is a fascinating record of a major Cambridge scholar's reaction to the new actresses of the London theatre, one that brings to bear on its theme an uncommon erudition in the service of a much more common prejudice.

## Notes

- 1 On actresses in the Restoration generally see, among others, Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700* (Cambridge, 1992) and Deborah Payne Fisk, ‘The Restoration Actress’, in *A Companion to Restoration Drama*, ed. Susan J. Owen (Oxford, 2008), 69–91, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663400.ch5>.
- 2 On Duport see James Henry Monk, ‘Memoir of Dr. James Duport, Regius Professor of Greek, and Dean of Peterborough’, in *Museum Criticum; or, Cambridge Classical Researches*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1826), 672–98, rpt as *Memoir of Dr. James Duport, Regius Professor of Greek, and Dean of Peterborough* (s.l., s.d.); G.V.M. Heap, ‘James Duport’s Cambridge Lectures on Theophrastus’, in *Pegasus: Classical Essays from the University of Exeter*, ed. H.W. Stubbs (Exeter, 1981), 84–97; Rosemary O’Day, ‘Duport, James (1606–1679)’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 3 James Duport, *Musae Subsecivae, seu Poetica Stromata* (Cambridge, 1676; Wing: D2652), 15–16.
- 4 On Roman discourses concerning grammatical gender and biological sex, see Anthony Corbeill, *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691163222.001.0001>.
- 5 See Raymond Lebègue, ‘L’Herodes Infanticida en France’, *Neophilologus* 23.1 (1938), 388–94; Jan Bloemendal, ‘Mythology on the Early Modern Humanists’ and Rhetoricians’ Stage in the Netherlands: The Case of Heinsius’ *Herodes Infanticida*’, in *Classical Mythology in the Netherlands in the Age of Renaissance and Baroque*, ed. Carl Van de Velde (Leuven, 2009), 333–50; Russ Leo, *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World* (Oxford, 2019), 197–206, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198834212.001.0001>; Russ Leo, ‘Herod and the Furies: Daniel Heinsius and the Representation of Affect in Tragedy’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49.1 (2019), 137–67, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-7279672>.
- 6 On *The New Utopia*, see especially Anette Pankratz, ‘Performing Republics: Negotiations of Political Discourse in Restoration Comedies’, in *Perspectives on English Revolutionary Republicanism*, ed. Dirk Wiemann and Gaby Mahlberg (London, 2014), 85–101, 95–8, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315600192>. On the Aristophanic elements of Howard’s comedies, see Edith Hall, ‘The English-Speaking Aristophanes, 1650–1914’, in *Aristophanes in Performance 421 BC–AD 2007: Peace, Birds, and Frogs*, ed. Edith Hall and Amanda Wrigley (London, 2007), 66–92, 69–70.

- 7 For the cast list see 'London Stage Event: 06 March 1671 at Lincoln's Inn Fields', *London Stage Database*, accessed 14 October 2022, <https://londonstagedatabase.uoregon.edu/event.php?id=935>.
- 8 Edward Howard, *The Six Days Adventure, or, The New Utopia* (London, 1671; Wing H2974), a3v, A2v, A3r.
- 9 The motto derives from Hor. *Ep.* 1.2.40.