

Introduction

Access and Contestation: Women's Performance in Early Modern England, Italy, France, and Spain

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In the professional theatre of early modern England, with rare exceptions, boys and men played women's roles. The success of this theatre industry, both in its own day and subsequently, has obscured other forms and sites of performance, enabling the assumption that all-male performance was the early modern norm and, concomitantly, that women did not perform. Recently, however, a growing body of scholarship has questioned the story of the 'all-male' stage and concluded that it requires radical rethinking.¹ This special issue on women and performance continues the project of rethinking, offering new instances of women's performance and assessing how performance made a difference for women, both culturally and in their own lives. In the process it seeks to supplement the paradigm of the 'all-male' stage with a more inclusive model of performance, multidisciplinary, transnational, and open to women's integral participation in the performance world of early modern England and continental Europe.

At the highest levels of society, queens, countesses, and other elite ladies not only patronized performances and particular performers but also appeared on stage as performers themselves, often in extravagant court entertainments produced for English aristocrats and foreign diplomats. Beyond London, women's performance was a significant, customary feature: women from all walks of life sponsored, played in, and provided material support for performances including parish dramas, May games, local pageants, and various forms of festive dance. Across the channel, women were famous as professional performers in Italy, Spain, and France. They led companies, developed new theatrical forms, and dazzled audiences with their virtuosic displays of theatrical skill. Furthermore, these actresses were known

internationally, including in England. As early as 1547, women from the Italian theatre performed for Henri II and Catherine de Medici in Lyon, and by 1574, women from the *Commedia dell'Arte* had appeared in London.² English commentators sometimes praised the foreign actress extravagantly; more often, they reviled her; what they did not do, however, was ignore her. The foreign woman player, like elite English women dancing in the court masque and local women dancing on feast days, *registered* in the imaginations of English spectators, men and women alike, inevitably shaping their understanding of performance and informing their sense of how, through performance, femininity and masculinity might be represented.

Scholars grappling with these questions have unearthed new data and published innovative analyses. James Stokes draws on scattered records of performance in Lincolnshire and Somerset to find women participating in May games and 'every other festive aspect of parish life as well. Innumerable records refer to their dancing at revels, weddings, inns, and wassailings'. In such records, Stokes discerns 'the outlines of an unbroken tradition of professional women entertainers stretching back hundreds of years'.³ At the elite level, Clare McManus argues that women's central role in the early Stuart masques allowed for significant female self-fashioning: 'Through dance women fashioned themselves as courtiers, using the performance which dance allowed them to create an elite female identity'.⁴ Sophie Tomlinson sees the court masque as crucial in cultivating positive attitudes about women's performance: 'the importance of the Stuart masque lies in the newly significant and signifying role accorded to female theatrical performance. ... In this new disposition, the theatrical woman is viewed sympathetically'.⁵ Introducing *Three Seventeenth-Century Plays on Women and Performance*, Tomlinson and her collaborators Hero Chalmers and Julie Sanders show that sympathy toward the theatrical woman helped change the cultural landscape over the course of the Stuart period, leading up to the introduction of professional actresses on the Restoration stage in 1660. All of these scholars agree that the range and continuity of women's performance throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries makes 1660 look not like a momentous break from a theatrical past that excluded women but rather like one moment in a contested cultural story in which women played a significant part. As Chalmers, Sanders, and Tomlinson put it, 'we need to think in terms not just of radical breaks in practice but of continuities of tradition'.⁶ In Stokes's terms, 'the "sudden" appearance of women on the stage in 1660 — often cited as an example of an abrupt, mysterious shift in theatrical taste — might more

accurately be seen as the natural culmination of a cultural process that has been mostly obscured by the fierce battles of the time between Puritans and others over the legitimacy of theater itself.⁷

Excavating women's role in theatre history, scholars have expanded the concept of performance to encompass women's participation in social rituals, local celebrations, and broadly conceived acts of self-representation.⁸ Natasha Korda contends that 'if we broaden our conception of what constitutes early modern theatrical production beyond the onstage activities of the professional playing companies in London's commercial theaters, we discover that women indeed participated in various kinds of performance and various aspects of production.'⁹ Korda has in fact explored the impact of women's labour on the 'all-male' professional theatre, clearly establishing that in fields from hawking goods to embroidering costumes, 'women participated in the work of theatrical production', materially shaping what appeared on stage.¹⁰ Moreover, she shows that the professional playwrights of the 'all-male' stage were obsessed by women's work in the informal theatrical economy, repeatedly representing it in their plays and seeking to manage its meaning. Not just in our own times, then, but also in the early modern period, women's relationship to performance drew intense cultural scrutiny.

Finding instances of women's performance in almost all corners of society, contemporary scholars can assess women as cultural agents far beyond what the analysis of plays written for men and boys to perform on London's professional stages would permit. But expanding our definition of performance also presents problems for feminist interpretation; indeed, McManus has called women's performance 'a test case for feminism [that] raises profound questions for the future of the discipline'.¹¹ Dymrna Callaghan warns that the feminist revisionist mode of scholarship, which finds performance in 'a vastly expanded range of persons and cultural practices', risks complacency: 'politically the graver danger is that revisionism is simply oblivious to, or in denial about, the structural inequities in early modern and, for that matter, contemporary patriarchy'.¹² Callaghan rightly insists that access to performance, broadly conceived, does not solve the problem of women's oppression in early modern or contemporary culture. She questions whether full participation in performance was even a *desideratum* for early modern women, who, she reminds us, 'are not found clamoring to get access to the English Renaissance stage because this was a disreputable rather than

a privileged site'. Confronting women's simultaneous participation in and exclusion from early modern culture, Callaghan coins the term 'excluded participants', which allows scholars to think complexly about the conditions of women's access to culture, the restrictions under which they laboured, and the uses they made of their opportunities to perform.¹³ Building on Callaghan's insights, McManus argues that early modern culture 'certainly required [women's] presence and their participation yet undeniably necessitated their subjection — but not all at once and not all in the same way'.¹⁴

On the continent, where women were accepted as actresses and acclaimed as great stars, access to the stage might seem to have placed them in a more affirmative relationship to culture and to some extent it did. Women performers in Italy, Spain, and France enjoyed professional opportunities that their counterparts in England did not. The renowned actress Isabella Andreini, for example, was celebrated in the courts of Italy and France; she was elected as a member of Pavia's *Accademia degli Intenti*; and she published volumes of poems and letters in addition to a pastoral play, *La Mirilla* (1588).¹⁵ Isabella's counterpart, Vittoria Piissimi, was lauded by Tomasso Garzoni in *La piazza universale* (1595) in the most encomiastic terms: 'But above all worthy of the highest honours is the divine Vittoria who metamorphoses herself on the stage: a beautiful sorceress of love, she entices the hearts of a thousand lovers with her words; a sweet siren, she enchants with smooth incantations the souls of her devout spectators'.¹⁶

Although the leading ladies of the continental theatre enjoyed levels of celebrity and praise that contemporary superstars might envy, women's performance remained a contested category whose terms often suggested aspects of the 'excluded participant' dynamic that Callaghan identifies in England. In France, for example, the first extant professional contracts written for women performers firmly subjugated them to their husbands: Virginia Scott has shown that when Marie Ferré signed with Antoine de L'Esperonnière's troupe in 1545, she did so 'with the stipulation that if her husband did not approve, the contract would be void'.¹⁷ Scott confirms that 'in the early years of professional theatre companies in France, women's participation was affected by the civil status of all married women, who were normally restricted from signing contracts and other legal agreements'.¹⁸ In Spain, too, regulations permitting women to appear on the professional stage nonetheless required them to do so 'accompanied by their husbands or fathers, and not otherwise'.¹⁹ In Italy, the women who performed with mountebanks were subject to attacks that conflated their selling of wares with the selling of their bodies.²⁰ When

Italian actresses performed in France in 1577, they were criticized for what one commentator perceived as inappropriate physical self-display: 'they showed their breasts and stomachs, and other parts of their chests were in perpetual movement'.²¹ This commentator's concern with the actresses' bodily display frames women performers sexually; indeed, the longstanding association between the actress and the courtesan led even an actress as prominent as Andreini to dissociate herself from transgressive sexuality through scrupulously strategic representations of her gender identity.²²

The French commentator's mistrust of women's bodies in performance suggests that the infinite physical openness of performance created problems that women performers had to negotiate, both on the continent and in England. As an art form based in the body, performance is chameleonic, elusive, and fundamentally antithetical to any attempt to control motion or stabilize meaning. In the Stuart court masque, for example, McManus shows that a series of gendered conventions sought to limit women's autonomous expressivity by restricting the movement and meanings of the female body on stage; indeed, McManus argues that 'the woman was considered the bearer, not the creator, of allegorical significance'.²³ Yet the inescapable fact of the body meant that women performers could never merely transmit predetermined meanings unproblematically. Movement, stillness, and gestures, not to mention the deliberate transgression of gendered codes, all signified in ways that insisted on the possibility of women's independent volition and agency. As McManus says of female masquers, '[they] in fact occupied an ambiguous, liminal position, transforming apparent tools of constraint into the means for near-autonomous self-fashioning'.²⁴

For women on stage, and for women and men in the audience, the actress's active, questing, desiring self-presentation was alternately exhilarating and disturbing, sometimes simultaneously so. The figure of the actress in effect intensifies the cultural power that Jean Howard suggests women enjoyed in theatre audiences. Like the woman on stage, the woman in the audience is not definitively knowable; in Howard's terms, she circulates 'in ways threatening to the larger patriarchal economy within which her circulation was in theory a highly structured process'.²⁵ Encouraging agency and stimulating desire, the broad economy of performance permits the performative woman to challenge and transform her culture, renegotiating her position and her relationships within it. In the patriarchal cultures of early modern Europe, however, women's

performance was always culturally complex: both feared and embraced, it was certainly an opportunity for innovative self-assertion, but it was also a challenge that women had to manage with the utmost care.²⁶ The study of early modern women's performance, then, has much to tell us about how, under what conditions, and at what costs, women gained access to meaningful cultural participation as well as the uses to which they put their access.

The eight essays in this special issue build on the best recent work on women and performance. Assuming broad definitions of performance, the essays collectively depict it as a field that offered women significant opportunities for cultural participation even as it positioned them in ways that they often sought to contest. In fact, creative contestation emerges as a major characteristic of women's performance: in instance after instance, performance both stimulated and showcased women's ingenuity in navigating fraught cultural terrain. Despite its difficulties, performance was an appealing cultural form for women, who turned to it across class and national boundaries. Our essays suggest they did so in order to participate in culture and politics, to assert a measure of control over their own lives, and to create newer, more satisfying modes of personal and professional experience.

Contributions

The eight essays in this issue address pressing questions related to both research and analysis. James Stokes and Melinda Gough provide new archival evidence of women's performance; Stokes and Peter Parolin explore the cultural implications of women's performance in popular English contexts; Gough, Bella Mirabella, and Mark Hutchings and Berta Cano-Echevarría analyze elite women's performance as a significant mode of political agency; Pamela Brown, Amy Tigner, and Virginia Scott consider the significance of women's performance across national boundaries, specifically in relation to the professional theatre. In the pages that follow, I have arranged the essays with three rough groupings in mind: occasional English performance (Stokes, Parolin); elite performance (Mirabella, Hutchings and Cano-Echevarría, Gough); and professional performance (Brown, Tigner, Scott).

In the section on occasional English performance, James Stokes looks at the REED evidence from Suffolk to argue that women were deeply and uncontroversially involved in all aspects of local performance throughout most of the sixteenth century. Stokes argues, however, that attitudes became more hostile toward women's performance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

centuries, a change that he attributes to reformist attacks on traditional culture. In my own essay on Will Kemp's *Nine Daies Wonder*, I consider the women who joined Kemp in his dance from London to Norwich, arguing that their relatively easy participation in the London star's ostensibly solo venture indicates room for collaboration between male and female performers in early modern England. I conclude that this collaborative model gives both women and men scope to exploit performance for their own ends.

Turning to elite performance, Bella Mirabella considers Elizabeth I's dancing over the course of her long reign, contending that the queen carefully used dance as a political tool to gain the upper hand on English courtiers and foreign diplomats. Mirabella finds in Elizabeth's manipulation of dance evidence of the queen's ongoing efforts to manage the challenge of being a female ruler. Mark Hutchings and Berta Cano-Echevarría assess the role of dance in the ratification of the peace between England and Spain in 1603–5, focusing on two masques, the first of which, danced in London in 1603, was reported in unusually scrupulous textual detail to the king of Spain and was then echoed in a second masque, danced in Valladolid in 1605. Hutchings and Cano-Echevarría argue that the masques served specific diplomatic functions and that the prominent role of women in both of them as sponsors and performers highlights elite women's use of cultural forms to shape political events. Melinda Gough next presents an important source of new information about the dancing of France's Marie de Medici. Transcribing, translating, and introducing the 1605 *ballet de la reine* that Marie danced in Paris, Gough presents the first modern critical edition of this performance, based on a long-overlooked manuscript in the Bibliothèque Inguimbertaine in Carpentras, France. Gough's introduction and notes enrich the current scholarly understanding of courtly women's ballets, suggesting that they could accommodate low elements, for example, and that, through the complex aesthetic responses they provoked, they were essential to the overall development of *ballet de cour*, or masque, as a genre.

The final section of this special issue addresses the professional theatre in a transnational context. Pamela Allen Brown analyzes the skills and dispositions of Italy's Commedia dell'Arte actresses, arguing that English knowledge of their working methods shaped the kinds of roles written for boys playing women on London's transvestite stages. Looking primarily at *As You Like It*, Brown argues that the play's obsession with women's performance reflects a general English propensity to appropriate the allure of the foreign diva to create new levels of glamour and erotic play for theatrical production

in England. Shifting from Italy to Spain, Amy Tigner identifies many features of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in the *comedias* of Spain, particularly in the Spanish actresses' freedom to improvise, cross-dress, and showcase linguistic virtuosity.²⁷ Tigner asks what impact the major roles played by women would have had on Spanish theatre and culture, suggesting that plays in which women spoke openly onstage about their desires and in which they took decisive control of their self-representation were bound to challenge the masculinist norms of a society that severely restricted women's levels of enfranchisement. Finally, Virginia Scott traces the evolution of roles for actresses across the seventeenth century in France. Scott considers the evolution of the role of the *nourrice* (the go-between/confidant), which was largely played by men in the late 1500s, to that of *confidentes et caractères*, which were played almost exclusively by women in the late 1600s. In Scott's analysis, the shift from men to women in these roles not only introduced a new mode of realism to the theatrical representation of women, but also expanded actresses' range of performance options and extended the length of their careers. The women of seventeenth-century French theatre, Scott suggests, laid important groundwork for later actresses' freedom to move between starring and supporting roles over the course of long careers on the professional stage.

The essays in this issue certainly speak to each other across the categories I have somewhat arbitrarily imposed: Mirabella's discussion of the aging Queen Elizabeth's performance strategies shares affinities with Scott's work on the development of roles for older actresses in France; Gough, Hutchings and Cano-Echevarría, Mirabella, and Parolin all focus on the expressive power of dance; Stokes, Tigner, and Scott explore women's performance, in very different contexts, as an index of cultural change; Brown and Tigner explore how modes of performance influence each other across geographical divides. The different approaches on display in this special issue, as well as the shared concerns that unite the essays, suggest that the study of early modern women's performance is currently, and will remain, a dynamic field for carefully considering the myriad possible meanings of women's access to culture, in England and beyond, then and now.

Notes

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- 1 See, for example, Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (eds), *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage* (Aldershot, 2005); Natasha Korda, 'Women in the Theater', Richard Dutton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre* (Oxford, 2009), 456–73; and Clare McManus, 'Early Modern Women's Performance: Toward a New History of Early Modern Theater?', *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009). The paradigm of the 'all-male' stage at best describes certain performance conditions that existed in the professional London theatre for a limited time. Yet even this concession is problematic given women's varied roles in bringing theatrical spectacles to life. See, for example, Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia, 2011). See also Susan Frye's review of *Labors Lost* in this issue.
 - 2 For a detailed timeline on women's involvement in the Commedia dell'Arte, see Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women in the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 2003), 187–265. See also Pamela Brown's essay in this issue.
 - 3 James Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis in Medieval and Renaissance Somerset (and Beyond)', *Comparative Drama* 27.2 (1993), 178, 182.
 - 4 Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court* (Manchester, 2002), 46.
 - 5 Sophie Tomlinson, *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge, 2005), 3.
 - 6 Hero Chalmers, Julie Sanders, and Sophie Tomlinson (eds), *Three Seventeenth-Century Plays on Women and Performance* (Manchester, 2006), 2.
 - 7 Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', 189.
 - 8 The expansion of the category of performance in relation to early modern women mirrors its expansion in contemporary performance studies. For an overview, see Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2004).
 - 9 Korda, 'Women in the Theater', 459.
 - 10 Korda, *Labors Lost*, 1.
 - 11 McManus, 'Early Modern Women's Performance', 166.
 - 12 Dympna Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies* (Basingstoke, 2007), 5, 6.

- 13 Ibid, 12–13, 7.
- 14 McManus, 'Early Modern Women's Performance', 167.
- 15 For a detailed analysis of Andreini's work, see MacNeil, *Women and Music*; for a selection of the poems, see Anne MacNeil, *Selected Poems of Isabella Andreini* (Lanham, Maryland, 2005); for the play, see Isabella Andreini, *La Mirtilla, A Pastoral*, trans. Julie D. Campbell (Tempe, 2002).
- 16 Quoted in Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford, 1990), 223–4.
- 17 Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, 2010), 59. See also Clare Sponsler's review of *Women on the Stage* in this issue.
- 18 Ibid, 60.
- 19 This document from 1600 is quoted in Maite Pascual Bonis, 'Women as Actresses and Theatre Managers in Early Modern Pamplona', Rina Walthaus and Marguérite Corporal (eds), *Heroines of the Golden StAge: Women and Drama in Spain and England 1500–1700* (Kassel, 2008), 74.
- 20 For a discussion of the commedia actress as a 'sexualized commodity fetish', see Rosalind Kerr, 'The Italian Actress and the Foundations of Early Modern European Theatre: Performing Female Sexual Identities on the Commedia dell'Arte Stage', *Early Theatre* 11.2 (2008), 181. See also M.A. Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre, 1500–1750: Literary Mountebanks and Performing Quacks* (Aldershot, 2007).
- 21 Quoted in Robert Henke, 'Border-Crossing in the *Commedia dell'Arte*', Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (eds), *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater* (Aldershot, 2008), 28.
- 22 In her complex discussion of Andreini's carefully gendered self-presentation, Anne MacNeil says that Andreini's image 'reflects a curious combination of both feminine and masculine attributes, which show the strain of pressure to publicize her various saleable talents. Indeed, her notoriety relied on the fact that she did not permanently trade her femininity for its masculine complement, but alternately exercised both forms of artistic authority, triumphing in the wit and élan that allowed her to move back and forth between them'. *Music and Women*, 90.
- 23 McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 10.
- 24 Ibid, 11.
- 25 Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York, 1994), 77. Noting that audience membership enfranchises women as active subjects who 'will exercise the power of looking', Howard suggests that many of the polemics encouraging women to shun the theatre may 'be a response, not only to a fear for woman, but also to a fear of woman' (79).

- 26 On the Spanish stage, for example, Melveena McKendrick notes that female characters, played by actresses, talked 'about their lives in ways that challenged orthodox thinking and that were therefore severely disapproved of by churchmen and moralists'. See 'Breaking the Silence: Women and the Word in *Comedia*', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 29.1 (2004), 19.
- 27 Brown and Tigner's interest in the migration of theatrical forms across national boundaries suggests the vitality of Louise George Clubb's concept of the theatregram for the study of early modern women's performance. Clubb holds that 'the same theatrical movement that promulgated the imitation of classical models produced romantic comedy and mixed genres, in Italy as well as England, and did so through a common process based on the principle of contamination of sources, genres, and accumulated stage structures, or theatergrams'. See *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven, 1989), 5.