INTRODUCTION

Women and Shakespeare in the Restoration

Prologue

The eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of interest in Shakespeare, a movement that took the form of editions, criticism, adaptations, performances, biographies and even forgeries. Society became fascinated both by the man and his works and Shakespeare was deliberately constructed as a national hero, the archetype of theatrical and literary culture and the arbiter of all things English.[1] But what was the role of women in this process? Women were deeply involved in the literary world both as consumers (readers) and as producers (writing and publishing in almost every conceivable genre of that time). They were similarly active in the theatre of the period, making up a large proportion of the playhouse audiences and (after 1660) performing on the professional stage and shaping the presentation of drama in the long eighteenth century. Given this fundamental involvement in culture and society, women must have had a significant impact on the developing reputation of Shakespeare.

By 1814, a character in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* could claim that Shakespeare was 'part of an Englishman's constitution'.[2] I believe that he was part of the Englishwoman's constitution as well. This book develops our understanding of how Shakespeare became Shakespeare by examining what the Bard meant to women critics, actresses and female playgoers and by exploring the contribution they made to shaping his reputation. By taking a fresh look at the roots of bardolatry through the lens of gender, this study enhances our knowledge of the relationship between gender and the formation of culture in the long eighteenth century.[3]

The influence of women on Shakespeare's reputation can be traced back to the Restoration. When the theatres reopened in 1660 after their eighteen-year closure, Shakespeare was well regarded but just one of a number of dramatists who provided material for the new playhouses to perform. By 1709 his works were considered important enough to warrant a full-scale edition (by Nicholas Rowe), which inaugurated a long tradition of eighteenth-century editions of

Shakespeare.[4] How did this shift occur? In fact, during the last decades of the seventeenth century, women were central to promoting Shakespeare as a cultural figure worthy of serious attention. In the Preface to her play *The Dutch Lover* (1673), Aphra Behn claimed an affinity between women and Shakespeare based on the conventional belief that Shakespeare was an uneducated genius, in contrast to his learned contemporary Ben Jonson: 'Plays have no great room for that which is mens great advantage over women, that is Learning: We all well know that the immortal Shakespears Playes (who was not guilty of much more of this than often falls to womens share) have better pleas'd the World than Johnsons works.'[5] Behn's sentiments were echoed by a variety of women, who found in Shakespeare an inspiration to enter the literary sphere or the theatre world and contributed to the process of his canonisation in distinct and important ways.

This introduction sets up this book's consideration of actresses, women critics and female playgoers in the eighteenth century by examining three case studies that explore the ways in which Shakespeare was emerging in the 1660s and examine how women responded to and influenced his developing reputation. The first recorded performance by a professional actress was in fact in a Shakespearean role, that of Desdemona. The prologue and epilogue written for this historic occasion provide us with important evidence about how the Restoration actress was received, suggesting the potential for her to make a powerful impact on the presentation of Shakespeare in the period. This potential was realised to a significant degree in the Restoration adaptations of his plays, which focus much more closely on the female characters, making actresses instrumental in the theatrical presentation of Shakespeare. As well as popularising Shakespeare on stage, women were also beginning to construct his significance on the page. The first critical essay on Shakespeare was written by a woman, Margaret Cavendish, who explored his representation of female characters in terms subsequently taken up by eighteenth-century critics interested in Shakespeare's depiction of human nature. And in addition to experiencing Shakespeare through reading, women of course also saw his works on the stage. Elizabeth Pepys, wife of the diarist, constitutes an important example of a Restoration woman playgoer and an analysis of her Shakespearean theatregoing allows us to draw conclusions both about the type of plays she saw and her opinions of these productions.

By examining the substantial engagement with Shakespeare of these three Restoration women, the introduction sets the scene for this book's exploration of the performers, critics and spectators who were instrumental in constructing Shakespeare's reputation in the decades that followed. These case studies, and the methodology of the book as a whole, respond to the call

by recent feminist theatre historiographers to broaden our parameters when writing women's theatre history to look beyond conventional sources and to 'decompose' historiography, reorganising and revaluing our evidence.[6] Sources that have previously been overlooked because they appear to contain few concrete details can with careful probing shed important light on the part played by women in the establishment of Shakespeare's place at the forefront of English culture, a process which has yet to receive sufficient critical attention. This book demonstrates that in constructing Shakespeare's significance to themselves and to society, women were fundamental to the establishment of Shakespeare's reputation in the eighteenth century.

The advent of the Shakespearean actress

Following the reopening of the theatres in 1660, a major shift in theatrical practice occurred: the advent of the professional female performer. While the impact of the actress on the Restoration theatre has been explored in detail,[7] the circumstances of her first performance have received less attention. On the early modern stage, women's parts had been performed by boy actors and this practice had continued for many years, accepted by the theatre audience. But it was in a performance of a Shakespeare play that the professional actress is believed to have made her stage debut in the Restoration. This probably occurred on 8 December 1660, when a woman played the part of Desdemona in a performance of *The Moor of Venice* (*Othello*) by the King's Company at the Vere Street theatre. The woman remains unidentified, but was probably Anne Marshall.[8] The occasion was exciting enough to warrant a special prologue and epilogue written by Thomas Jordan to mark the event and both of these texts focus intensively on the actress, with the epilogue linking her explicitly with the Shakespearean character she played. Critics warn that we should be careful not to take prologues and epilogues too seriously; indeed they certainly constitute a form prone to exaggeration for comic effect.[9] In fact, this prologue and epilogue constitute a major source regarding the first known appearance of a professional actress on the English stage and so deserve close consideration. While the specific claims made by the speaker of the texts (that is, that he has had sexual access to the actress) are likely to be unfounded, the prologue and epilogue give us significant evidence of a different kind, revealing attitudes towards the first professional female performer. An analysis of these paratexts allows us to see how the advent of the Shakespearean actress was constructed and received.

Both texts are worth quoting in full, since although they are sometimes briefly discussed by critics they have not previously received a detailed analysis. First the prologue:

> I Come, unknown to any of the rest
> To tell you news; I saw the Lady drest;
> The Woman playes to day, mistake me not,
> No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat;
> A Woman to my knowledge, yet I cann't
> (If I should dye) make *Affadavit* on't.
> Do you not twitter Gentlemen? I know
> You will be censuring, do't fairly though;
> 'Tis possible a vertuous woman may
> Abhor all sorts of looseness, and yet play;
> Play on the Stage, where all eyes are upon her,
> Shall we count that a crime *France* calls an honour?
> In other Kingdoms Husbands safely trust'um,
> The difference lies onely in the custom;
> And let it be our custom I advise,
> I'm sure this Custom's better than th'Excise,
> And may procure us custom; hearts of flint
> Will melt in passion when a woman's in't
> But Gentlemen you that as judges sit
> In the Star-Chamber of the house the Pit;
> Have modest thoughts of her; pray do not run
> To give her visits when the Play is done,
> With dam me, your most humble Servant Lady,
> She knows these things as well as you it may be:
> Not a bit there dear Gallants, she doth know
> Her own deserts, and your temptations too.
> But to the point, in this reforming age
> We have intents to civilize the Stage.
> Our women are defective, and so siz'd
> You'd think they were some of the Guard disguiz'd;
> For (to speak truth) men act, that are between
> Forty and fifty, Wenches of fifteen;
> With bone so large, and nerve so incomplyant,
> When you call *Desdemona*, enter Giant;
> We shall purge every thing that is unclean,
> Lascivious, scurrilous, impious or obscene;
> And when we've put all things in this fair way
> *Barebones* himself may come to see a Play.[10]

The speaker of the prologue enters eagerly and furtively to tell the audience the exciting news that a woman is going to perform. He is sure of her gender

because he has seen her dressing before the performance and so can vouch that she is really a 'Lady', not a 'Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat' (lines 2, 4). Jordan anticipates potential criticism of a woman putting herself in the public eye by claiming that an actress can remain chaste, even when subjecting herself to the gaze of the audience: ''Tis possible a vertuous woman may / . . . / Play on the Stage, where all eyes are upon her' (lines 9–11). He goes on to suggest that adapting to the idea of female performers is simply a matter of custom, and any initial reluctance to accept the actress can be easily overcome:

> Shall we count that a crime *France* calls an honour?
> In other Kingdoms Husbands safely trust'um,
> The difference lies onely in the custom;
> And let it be our custom I advise. (lines 12–15)

This highlights an important reason for the advent of the actress: during the Civil War and Interregnum when the theatres were closed, the court was exiled in continental Europe, including France, where actresses were already common.[11] Thus the introduction of women to the stage is couched in terms of following the custom of other countries. This justifies the move as a harmless once, since it had been tested elsewhere. Jordan also puns here on custom in its commercial sense – actresses will attract more custom to the theatres – a move that links the actress to the figure of the prostitute (a woman paid for the public use of her body).[12]

Jordan goes on to offer another reason for the advent of the actress, the deficiencies of the current performers of female roles: 'Our women are defective, and so siz'd / You'd think they were some of the Guard disguiz'd' (lines 29–30). He is of course being disingenuous here, since on the early modern stage young female leads like Desdemona were not played by the type of burly men he implies but by young male actors highly trained in the art of impersonating women.[13] In any case, it is unlikely that the reason for the introduction of the actress was because boys were inadequate performers of female roles since the practice had endured for over sixty years before the theatres closed. Restoration actor Edward Kynaston played women's roles at the same time as actresses were being introduced to the stage and he was considered more than capable of adequately portraying female parts: he was famously described by the prompter John Downes as 'a Compleat Female Stage Beauty, performing his Parts so well . . . that it has since been Disputable among the Judicious, whether any Woman that succeeded him so Sensibly touch'd the Audience as he'.[14] The diarist Samuel Pepys also saw him act and described him as making 'the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life'.[15]

Jordan's primary justification for the introduction of the actress is that the move will 'civilize the Stage' by purging 'every thing that is unclean, / Lascivious, scurrilous, impious or obscene' (lines 28, 35–6). This foreshadows the royal patent issued to Thomas Killigrew on 25 April 1662, which officially allowed the casting of women in female roles:

> For as much as many plays formerly acted do contain several profane, obscene and scurrilous passages, and the women's parts therein have been acted by men in the habit of women, at which some have taken offence, for the preventing of these abuses for the future . . . we do likewise permit and give leave that all the women's parts . . . may be performed by women so long as their recreations, which by reason of the abuses aforesaid were scandalous and offensive, may by such reformation be esteemed not only harmless delight, but useful and instructive representations of human life.[16]

Jordan claims that the primary motivation for introducing female performers to the stage was for reasons of social and moral reform; the sight of a woman on stage is deemed less offensive and potentially corrupting than the sight of boys dressed in women's clothes. But despite Jordan's professions that the introduction of women will have a positive moral effect on the theatre, his prologue considers the actress largely in sexual terms. He tells us he has seen her dressing and that she is a woman to his 'knowledge' (line 5), a double entendre that suggests he has been sexually intimate with her.[17]

The speaker also entreats the men in the audience to 'have modest thoughts' of the actress, which might of course encourage them to do just the opposite. He asks the men not to 'run / To give her visits when the Play is done' (lines 21–2), which again could have the effect of encouraging rather than prohibiting, suggesting to them that they too can go backstage and have 'knowledge' of the actress.[18] The line 'she knows these things as well as you it may be' (line 24) adds further titillation, suggesting that the actress is sexually experienced and open to offers. The insistence on her sexuality in this prologue sets up the actress as sexually available to the audience. Thus from the first entrance of the first woman on the professional stage in England, the actress is constructed as a sexual object available to be appropriated by men. Furthermore, since drama is a public and commercial enterprise, with the audience paying for what it sees on the stage, the performer becomes dependent on public opinion and the actress's sexuality becomes a commodity that can be bought by the spectator.

Jordan's epilogue is less often cited but is of particular interest for the way in which it ties the figure of the Restoration actress to the Shakespearean character of Desdemona:

And how d'ye like her, come what is't ye drive at,
She's the same thing in publick as in private;
As far from being what you call a Whore,
As *Desdemona* injur'd by the Moor?
Then he that censures her in such a case
Hath a soul blacker than *Othello's* face:
But Ladies what think you, for if you tax
Her freedom with dishonour to your Sex,
She means to act no more, and this shall be
No other Play but her own Tragedy;
She will submit to none but your commands,
And take Commission onely from your hands.[19]

The licentious undertones of the prologue are continued as the actor asks 'how d'ye like her' (line 1), reinforcing the idea of the actress as a commodity to be appraised and appropriated by playgoers. Jordan again attempts to deflect any criticism of the moral implications of having a woman appear on the public stage by claiming that she is as virtuous as Desdemona, unjustly accused of being unchaste. But Jordan's insistence on the question of the actress's virtue puts this issue uppermost in the minds of the audience, leaving them pondering whether she might in fact be sexually available to them. The final verdict on the actress is ostensibly left to the ladies in the audience and the speaker claims that if they find the appearance of a woman on stage immoral, the actress will not perform again, making this play nothing but 'her own Tragedy' (line 10). This is problematic for the ladies in the audience as if they consider the actress unchaste, they have then been witness to an inappropriate spectacle, which puts them in a dubious moral position. Furthermore, Jordan's conflation of the actress's personal character with the role of Desdemona means that if the actress is not chaste despite all the protestations to the contrary, which would be the implication if the ladies in the audience disapprove of her, then on some level neither is Desdemona. This changes the terms of Shakespeare's play and would profoundly alter the audience's response to the character, denying them the possibility of sympathising with her. In this situation it seems that the women in the audience have no choice but to approve of the arrival of the actress.

Although Jordan is somewhat disingenuous in his efforts to ensure that female playgoers assent to the proposed new custom of the professional actress, his preoccupation with doing so is revealing since it suggests that this is an important step in transforming this risky experiment into habitual theatrical practice. That the female audience's reactions to Restoration

drama and stage conventions might be taken seriously is suggested by the case of Edward Ravenscroft's play *The London Cuckolds* (1681). The prologue to his next drama, *Dame Dobson* (1683), describes the disapproval of the play expressed by women and Ravenscroft's reaction to it:

> His *London Cuckolds* did afford you sport.
> That pleas'd the Town, and did divert the Court.
> But 'cause some squeamish Females of renown
> Made visits with design to cry it down,
> He swore in's Rage he would their humors fit,
> And write the next without one word of Wit.
> No Line in this will tempt your minds to Evil,
> It's true, 'tis dull, but then 'tis very civil.[20]

Although this passage is redolent with sarcasm and Ravenscroft's bitter claims for the dullness of *Dame Dobson* are doubtless exaggerated, it makes clear that women were a sector of the audience whose interests had to be considered by dramatists in order to ensure the success of their works. The female audience's acceptance of certain dramatic and performance conventions thus serves as a sort of barometer for the acceptability of theatre in society. This is of course central to women's role in bardolatry, since the stage presentation of Shakespeare also had to meet with their approval.

Ultimately, Jordan encourages the women in the audience to approve of the advent of the actress in order to ensure that this enticing sexual spectacle remains on the stage to further the theatrical enjoyment of the male members of the audience. But there is also a strong possibility that female playgoers might benefit from this recently introduced stage convention in which women are placed in a newly prominent position as cultural mediators. Indeed, Jordan's attempt to portray the first Shakespearean actress in predominantly sexual terms may be read as an attempt to keep her agency in check. Michael Shapiro posits that the reason for the exclusion of women from the professional stage in England until the Restoration 'was a desire on the part of male actors to preserve the profession of acting as a site for male employment'.[21] And Peter Thomson suggests that the advent of actresses met with hostility from some male performers because of the element of competition that was introduced; given the novelty value of the female performer, the contest did not seem a fair one.[22] In this context, it is interesting to note that Jordan was himself a boy actor before the closure of the theatres, performing with the King's Revels Company in the 1630s. Might his text display anxiety about women taking over a domain of art, and indeed public life, previously reserved for men?

Laura J. Rosenthal has argued that the Restoration theatre negotiates changes to the conception and performance of patriarchy in the period by 'enact[ing] the decay of some forms of masculine authority, while at the same time intensifying the objectification of the female body (onstage and implicitly in the audience) as a cultural strategy for recapturing eroded masculine authority in a different form'.[23] She sees the decay of masculine authority evidenced in the many plays of the Restoration that depict sympathetic female characters making their own choices about love and marriage. This argument can be extended to consider Jordan's paratexts, which I believe should also be read in these terms. Jordan's focus on the actress's sexuality can in fact be seen as a strategy to contain women who are now being put in a powerful position, speaking directly to the audience in public from the stage. Finally it is crucial to note that the English stage never went back to having boys perform women's parts and so never rescinded the power granted to the first actress in 1660. Thanks to the efforts of the first female performer of Shakespeare, the woman continued to play throughout the eighteenth century, opening up an important means by which women could both interpret and popularise his works.

The impact of the Restoration actress on the presentation of Shakespeare

As Jordan's prologue and epilogue make clear, the new commodity of the actress was something that the theatre could use to great advantage in a bid to please the audience and boost profits. Indeed, the advent of the actress had a profound effect on the drama produced after 1660 and, significantly for the purposes of this study, on the way in which Shakespeare was presented on the Restoration stage.[24] By mid-1661 actresses were well established in the theatre and popular with playgoers. Adapters recognised this and worked to enhance the possibilities for the Shakespearean actress by increasing the relatively small number of female characters in Shakespeare's plays and by expanding existing female roles in the canon, thereby giving women a prominent place in the theatre of the time. Thus John Dryden and William Davenant's version of *The Tempest* (1667) introduces Dorinda, a sister for Miranda who is also unacquainted with the opposite sex; and Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* (1681) develops the role of Cordelia who, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart who is absent in France for much of the play, remains in England actively searching for her father, becoming more involved in the action of the drama.[25]

As one might expect given the attitudes to the actress expressed in Jordan's paratexts there was undeniably a large degree of exploitation involved in the use of the female body on the Restoration stage, and such conventions were also employed in the staging of Shakespeare.[26] The 'innocence' of Miranda and Dorinda allows the playwrights to extract much bawdy humour from their burgeoning desire to see this strange beast, the man, for the first time. Miranda claims she would 'rather be in pain nine Months . . . than lose my longing' to see him and Dorinda asserts her desire to observe the forbidden creature: 'Though I dye for't, I must have th'other peep.'[27] But the increased presence of women on the stage offered actresses some autonomy over artistic expression. The actresses performing these roles in *The Tempest* presumably exaggerated the lines quoted above for comic effect and thereby were instrumental in creating the humour of such scenes, rather than them simply being a joke at the actresses' expense.

As with humour, the creation of pathos also relied on the histrionic powers of the actress: female characters were often given extravagant emotional lines designed to move the audience. Elizabeth Barry was particularly adept at invoking pathos: John Downes claimed that she 'forc'd Tears from the Eyes of her Auditory' when performing affecting speeches.[28] As Lavinia in Thomas Otway's *Caius Marius* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*), faced with the death of her beloved she is given a violent speech in which she wishes to 'rend these Walls with Lamentation, / Tear up the Dead from their corrupted Graves, / And dawb the face of Earth with her own Bowels'.[29] As Cordelia in Tate's *King Lear*, her emotions are directed towards her father: she begs Gloster to 'Convey me to his breathless Trunk',

> With my torn Robes to wrap his hoary Head,
> With my torn Hair to bind his Hands and Feet,
> Then with a show'r of Tears
> To wash his Clay-smear'd Cheeks, and Die beside him.[30]

As Barry grew older she increasingly played maternal roles, which led to a new emphasis on mothers in tragedy. Colley Cibber's *Richard III* (1700) included a scene in which the princes in the Tower are violently separated from their mother, Queen Elizabeth, giving rise to her emotional lamentations: 'Support me Heaven! / For life can never bear the pangs of such a parting. / O my poor Children! O distracting thought!'[31]

Such depictions of romantic, filial and maternal distress are part of the development of a new theatrical genre: she-tragedy was a type of drama that emphasised female suffering in order to evoke an emotional response in the audience. Such suffering could be obviously physical or sexual (as in the case