Sometime in 1579, anti-theatricalist Stephen Gosson made the curious remark that theatre “effeminated” the mind. Four years later, in a pamphlet twice the size, Phillip Stubbes claimed that male actors who wore women’s clothing could literally “adulterate” male gender. Fifty years later, in a thousand-page tract which may have hastened the closing of the theatres, William Prynne described a man whom women’s clothing had literally caused to “degenerate” into a woman.

How can we account for such fears of effeminization? What did Renaissance playwrights do with such a legacy? Laura Levine examines the ways in which Shakespeare, Jonson and Marlowe addressed a generation’s anxieties about gender and the stage and identifies the way the same “magical thinking” informed documents we much more readily associate with extreme forms of cultural paranoia: documents (like King James’ Daemonologie) dedicated to the extermination of witches.

“[This book provides] one of the most searching and subtle perspectives on the contributions and limitations of New Historicism . . . Laura Levine is a critic of the first rank.”

Patricia Parker

“Intersecting with recent work on the construction of gender in the period, the significance of English transvestite acting companies, and the dramatic repertory itself, this book will force a great many people in the field to re-think what they thought they knew about such issues . . . The questions which frame Levine’s analysis are both central to the works examined and yet far from obvious – at least until thus articulated . . . Masterfully written . . . a pleasurable read.”

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“Levine’s book will revise our sense of masculinity in the period. No other critic has anatomized the crisis of masculinity implicit in the anti-theatrical position with such precision, details, and insight, or has developed from that central notion so many relevant insights and provocative readings . . . an original brave voice.”

Valerie Traub
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Anti-theatricality and effeminization, 1579–1642
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Men in women’s clothing
Anti-theatricality and effeminization, 1579–1642

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