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978-0-521-46627-1 - Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization,
1579-1642

Laura Levine

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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.”

Steven Mullaney

“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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The last twenty years have seen a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political and cultural history. While the earliest New Historicist work was criticised for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and of the concept of identity itself, on theatre as a political and economic phenomenon and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. *Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture* is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theatre which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our own history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

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Assistant Professor of English, Wellesley College



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521466271

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First published 1994
 Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Levine, Laura, 1955–
 Men in women's clothing: anti-theatricality, 1579–1642 / Laura Levine.
 p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Renaissance literature and culture: 5)

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 45507 3 (hardback). ISBN 0 521 46627 X (paperback)

1. English drama – Early modern and Elizabethan, 1500–1600 – History and criticism.
2. Sex role in literature.
3. Female impersonators – England – History – 16th century.
4. Female impersonators – England – History – 17th century.
5. English drama – 17th century – History and criticism.
6. Literature and society – England – History.
7. Masculinity (Psychology) in literature.
8. Theater and society – England – History.
9. Clothing and dress in literature.
10. Women in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR658.S42L48 1994
 822'.309353–dc20 93-27476 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-45507-7 hardback
 ISBN 978-0-521-46627-1 paperback

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For my family

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Acknowledgements

Chapter 1 of this book appeared in *Criticism* vol. 28. no. 2 (Spring, 1986) under the title “Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642,” and I am grateful to Wayne State University Press for permission to reprint it and to Arthur Marotti for taking an interest in my work at an early stage of its development. I have also had the opportunity to present portions of this book at the Renaissance Society of America Conference, thanks to Stephen Orgel; the Fifth World Shakespeare Congress in Tokyo, thanks to Steven Mullaney and Peter Stallybrass; the Reconfiguring the Renaissance Conference, thanks to Jonathan Crewe; and the MLA.

I am grateful to both the National Endowment of the Humanities and Wellesley College for making it possible to have time to complete the book, as well as to the Beatrice S. Berry Fund for making travel to the Tokyo Shakespeare Congress possible.

I would like to thank Stephen Orgel whose example, insight and faith in the project have enlivened it since its inception and Jonathan Crewe whose agile questions helped it at so many different stages to take shape. I am grateful to Jane Tylus for her extraordinary criticism and to Susan Meyer, Pat Bellanca and Frank Donoghue whose capacity to listen to the manuscript at moments when the lines of its logic seemed invisible to me often brought those lines back into existence. Rory Metcalf, Jeff Stone, Suzanne Bixby and the late Adele Bowers read and reread the book. Valerie Traub and Katherine Maus read it after it was completed, and for their large and penetrating constructions of it I am grateful. Among the colleagues, friends and family who commented on all or parts of the manuscript as it evolved or after it was completed, I would particularly like to thank Lynda Boose, Daniel Fischlin, Jonathan Goldberg, Lorraine Hirsch, Esther Levine, Harry Levine, Joe Levine, Julia Lupton, Pat Parker and Ken Reinhard, as well as the students with whom these ideas took form. My largest debt of gratitude must go to Peter Saenger who has read this manuscript more times than any human being should have to read anything. In a very real way it could not have been written without him.