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978-0-521-56842-5 - Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's
England

Stephen Orgel

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

This book began as an investigation of a specialized and specific issue. Its working title was *Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?* – a graceless title, no doubt, but one that articulates a question that seems to me a basic and irresistible one about the Elizabethan theatre. It has not seemed so to three centuries of theatre historians, who have treated it as a minor point, of interest primarily for its effect on disguise plots. The matter has generally been disposed of by observing that the English were used to an all-male stage from generations of university productions and mystery plays, the latter performed by the all-male craft guilds, and that the appearance of women on stage was forbidden because it was felt in the Renaissance to compromise their modesty. This is probably correct as far as it goes, though as we shall see, certain significant problems have been occluded in the case of the craft guilds; but a glance across the channel reveals its inadequacy as an explanation. French, Spanish and Italian society was just as familiar with academic and guild performances, and quite as deeply concerned with female virtue as England was, and none banned actresses from the public stage. Actresses were, to be sure, a relatively new phenomenon in continental theatres, first appearing around the middle of the sixteenth century; but by Shakespeare's time they were a commonplace feature of the European stage – societies that maintained a public stage expected to see women on it. The English equation of actresses with whores was also common in France and Italy, but this was not seen as an impediment to their performing in plays. Spain provides an even more striking parallel. Spanish morality was far more restrictive of

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women's behavior than English morality was; nevertheless, actresses appeared on Spanish stages with the explicit approval of both civil and ecclesiastical authorities – as did, moreover, transvestite boys. The problem of female chastity was sufficiently resolved, officially at least, in French and Spanish theatres merely by requiring that the actresses be married.¹

There were, to be sure, countries besides England that proscribed women from the public stage – for example the Netherlands, and certain areas of Protestant Germany. But here it was theatre itself that was felt to be morally dangerous, and the acting profession therefore imperiled the virtue of men as well as women. In these societies, the solution was to dispense with the public stage entirely – actors were no more tolerable than actresses. Viewed in a European context, the English situation is anomalous.

Once we allow ourselves to address such issues, it is natural to look for explanations for them – explanations that will be both culturally specific and sufficiently broad to account for what appears, at least in the history of Renaissance theatre as we have constructed it, an uninflected and remarkably long-lived phenomenon. But to set the matter up as a question – why did the English stage take boys for women? – is in a sense to misrepresent it. The question conceals (and may, indeed, be a way of concealing) important prior and more basic issues. What is the relation between the construction of gender on the stage – any stage – and in society at large; why has the uniqueness of gender construction on the English stage never seemed problematic until now; and – perhaps even more substantive – what would qualify for us as an adequate explanation?

Indeed, to set the matter up as a question at all presupposes that there is an answer; but to answer a question so narrowly conceived is to close it off, and thereby to trivialize it. There are many possible kinds of answers, but they all lead to more questions; and ultimately it is the openness of the question, and the ambiguities and ambivalences of the two cultural situations – Renaissance and

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contemporary – generating it, that we must address. I am, then, not undertaking to answer a question but to raise one; to address an exfoliating cultural issue of which we can give many kinds of accounts, but none sufficient to settle the matter, for the matter is a process that is still going on. The question, at its deepest level, is how gender was constructed by Early Modern cultures; to ask this is also to ask how it is constructed by our own, and – more disturbingly – why it is constructed in that way. Whatever answers we give, the question will remain.

We might begin by observing that in its own time the issue did not seem like a question. It was the continental theatre that was, for English viewers, problematic and eccentric. “Our players are not as the players beyond the sea,” wrote Thomas Nashe in *Pierce Penniless*, “a sort of squirting bawdy comedians, that have whores and common courtesans to play women’s parts, and forbear no immodest speech or unchaste action that may provoke laughter.”² The matter is presented as a self-evident index to the viciousness of foreigners. There were many polemical debates in England about the dangers to public morality of transvestite boy actors; but none that argued in favor of the introduction of women as an alternative. That part of the issue was not in question.

Nevertheless, the totalizing aspects of claims such as Nashe’s need scrutiny: is it true that women never appeared on English stages? The claim, to begin with, can relate only to the public theatre; women commonly appeared as dancers in court masques throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and under the patronage of Henrietta Maria, Charles I’s French queen, they took speaking roles in court plays as well. The practice was not limited to the Frenchified world of Whitehall: the sizable role of the Lady in *Comus* was performed by the fifteen-year-old Lady Alice Egerton when Milton’s masque was presented before her father, the Earl of Bridgewater, in 1634. But the point is not merely that remarks such as Nashe’s refer only to the public stage; it is that the performer’s

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amateur status made the whole difference: for those to whom theatre was not in itself problematical, there was no stigma whatever attached to women performing in plays, so long as they did not do it as a profession.

The problem then seems to be not with the effect of women on audiences, but specifically with women who define themselves as actresses and with audiences that are "public," that is, indiscriminately composed. But let us press further: how accurate is Nashe's claim even with regard to the public stage? It seems to imply not only a distinction between the theatres of England and the Continent, but a distinction that was categorical and permanent. Theatrical history has certainly read the English situation in this way. A recent attempt to understand the theatrical use of transvestite boys by invoking the concept of androgyny observes that English companies were all male, and had always been so: "the audience had never experienced anything else."³ The unwillingness to interrogate the most basic information is characteristic of theatre history as a whole. It is certainly true that the professional theatre companies of Shakespeare's time included no women. But how do we know that the English public stage had always been exclusively male?

We do not know it. In fact, there is counterevidence bearing on the matter to be found even in the standard histories. Glynne Wickham cites the records of the London Lord Mayor's Shows in which payments to several women who took roles in the entertainments of 1523 and 1534 are recorded⁴ – there were in London in the early sixteenth century professional women performers who were hired to appear in public entertainments. Wickham goes on to deduce what should be an important inference from these data: that "in the Middle Ages and in Tudor times, women could and did perform both as amateurs and professionals in so far as society would allow them to." The final cautious qualification is understandable, given the history of the discipline; Wickham does nothing further with his information, and the

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process of rethinking the gender assumptions of English theatre history on the basis of such evidence, or even of attempting to account for what appear, in English stage history as we understand it, striking anomalies, can barely be said to have begun.

That it *has* begun, however, is undeniable. Wickham in fact offered more evidence than this for the participation of women in medieval drama. In the late fifteenth century in Chester, a play of the Assumption of the Virgin is recorded as having been performed by “the wives of this town.” In 1972 Rosemary Woolf challenged the evidence, arguing that the crucial word must be not “wives” but “weavers”; but then, having rejected the claim, she goes on to make an important observation: there is no reason to believe that women did not, in fact, “occasionally” perform in medieval drama.⁵ That is, a medievalist writing in 1972 could find no reason to believe what historians of the theatre have simply taken for granted.⁶ Woolf’s paleographic argument, however, has in turn been undermined by more recent work: the REED volume on the Chester documents leaves no doubt that “wives” is in fact the correct reading in the surviving sources.⁷ Indeed, as early as 1954 Jean Robertson and D. J. Gordon had found in the dramatic records of the London livery companies evidence that “women in Tudor pageants were by no means always impersonated by boys: in 1519 two maidens were engaged to play Our Lady and St. Elizabeth; and in 1534 four ladies played the Virgin Mary and her three attendants.”⁸

So until the 1530s, at least, women seem to have performed unproblematically in guild and civic theatrical productions. The evidence for actresses on the English stage is not, however, limited to pre-Elizabethan times. I myself found two women apparently routinely performing professionally as theatrical singers in 1632. One was French, a Madame Coniack, and can perhaps be explained away as a foreign exception, but the other was named Mistress Shepard. I noted their existence in *Inigo Jones*,⁹ but all my attempts to pursue the matter further drew blanks. These performers can hardly

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have been unique and have caused no contemporary comment; but are they basically anomalies or the tip of an iceberg? To my knowledge, though they appear in an easily available source, the printed text of Aurelian Townshend's *Tempe Restored*, only one other critic has expressed any interest in them – in the history of English theatre, they do not exist.

The exceptional critic, however, is worth attending to. Suzanne Gossett, in the course of a survey of women in Jacobean and Caroline masques, points out that the appearance of Madame Coniack in *Tempe Restored* deserves to be considered a genuinely symbolic moment in the history of the English stage. Coniack took the role of Circe; when confronted in the masque by Pallas Athena, played by a male actor, she banished the goddess with words that must have been stunning in their contemporary setting: "Man-maid, begone!"¹⁰ The theatre at this moment in 1632 calls into question the whole culture of the naturalized transvestite actor. It is not irrelevant that Circe, the sorceress who transforms men into beasts, is the villain of this fable; but in fact the question she raises was increasingly central to Caroline theatrical life. Sophie Tomlinson points out that the word "actress" as a term for a stage player was first used of Queen Henrietta Maria in her court plays; Tomlinson persuasively argues that it was through the continuing acrimonious debate over women on the Whitehall stage that the naturalization of the actress took place. When the theatres reopened in 1660, the introduction of women on the public stage was accomplished without objection.¹¹

What, then, about the claim that English moral attitudes precluded the appearance of women on the stage? Once again, the evidence concerning moral attitudes needs a hard look. The polemics of antitheatrical tracts are luridly misogynistic, but they hardly constitute evidence. Thomas Coryat's observation that in Venetian theatres he "saw women acte, a thing that I never saw before" is frequently cited, though the rest of the sentence, that he

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has "heard that it hath been sometimes used in London," is generally omitted.¹² No doubt Coryat is telling the truth about his own experience, but how far can we generalize from this? We know, for example, that Italian companies performed in Elizabethan England from time to time, and Italian companies always included women; was it really women Coryat had never seen on stage, or only professional actresses, or only English professional actresses? It may certainly have been the first of these, but we are not justified in assuming, therefore, either that because Coryat did not see women on stage in England, he could not have done so, or that because Coryat did not see them, nobody did.

G. E. Bentley cites the visit of a French company in 1629, at a time when Queen Henrietta Maria's amateur theatricals had already begun at court. A contemporary account of it survives in a letter of Thomas Brande's:

you should know, that last daye certaine vagrant French players, who had bene expelled from their owne contrey, *and those women*, did attempt, thereby giving just offence to all vertuous and well-disposed persons in this town, to act a certain lacivious and unchaste comedye, in the French tonge at the Blackfryers. Glad I am to saye they were hissed, hooted, and pippin-pelted from the stage, so as I do not thinke they will soone be ready to trie the same againe.¹³

This seems to justify all the usual generalizations about English moral attitudes; but in fact it only reveals the problems of using contemporary comment as evidence: as Bentley goes on to point out, the letter is seriously in error. The players performed publicly twice more during the next few weeks, at the Red Bull and the Fortune. Indeed, William Prynne gives a quite contradictory account of the occasion, noting with outrage the popularity of the "*French-women Actors*, in a Play not long since personated in *Blackefriers Play-house*, to which there was great resort."¹⁴

It is clear, then, that foreign actresses were acceptable on the

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English public stage, at least from time to time. What about English actresses? Mistress Shepard appeared in a court performance; if she was a professional, this can hardly have been her only employment. We know that the famous Moll Frith, the model for Middleton's and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, gave a solo performance at the Fortune in 1611. I shall return to this; here, it is sufficient to point out that she did so at a major London theatre before an audience that bought tickets to see her, and without interference from the authorities. Nor was this a unique instance: Richard Madox recorded that in 1583 he "went to the theatre to see a scurvie play set out al by one virgin" – the actress pleased him no better than the play, and he left before the end.¹⁵ How special are these cases?

An even more striking example relating to popular attitudes is found in the famous case of Richard Vennar's phantom play *England's Joy*. Vennar was a theatrical entrepreneur, clearly of considerable ingenuity. In 1602 he advertised a pageant play to be performed at the Swan celebrating English history and culminating in the reign of Queen Elizabeth – it is she who is England's joy. All that survives of the play is the playbill, which includes a detailed summary of the action; the crucial evidence for our purposes, however, comes from John Chamberlain, who wrote to Dudley Carleton that the major attraction of the production was that the roles were to be "acted only by certain gentlemen and gentlewomen of account."¹⁶ The promise of seeing both women and gentry on stage sold a large number of tickets; but when the time came, Vennar was found to have decamped with the receipts, and there was no play – and doubtless never had been one.

If advertising women performers was an effective way of selling tickets, public opinion was obviously not averse to such a spectacle. Chambers cites two other examples of actresses on the Elizabethan stage, calling them exceptions that prove the rule;¹⁷ but by this time it is clear that we do not at all know what the rule is. Obviously our evidence does not support any blanket claim that women were

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excluded from the stages of Renaissance England, but it may certainly indicate that the culture, and the history that descends from it, had an interest in rendering them unnoticeable. Our own history, constructing gender and the nature of the desire engendered by it as a binary opposition, has rendered the constructed quality of the subject – what is recognized as masculine and feminine, whether on stage or off – all but invisible. This is a book about what has been unnoticeable and invisible.

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The performance of desire

I have begun by questioning some basic information about the English Renaissance theatre. It is a commonplace to observe that the stage in Shakespeare's time was an exclusively male preserve, but theatre historians tend to leave the matter there, as if the fact merely constituted a practical arrangement and had no implications.¹ But it has very broad implications, which are both cultural and specifically sexual: the male public theatre represents a uniquely English solution to the universal European disapproval of actresses. No contemporary continental public theatre restricted the stage to men. So the first puzzle, if one is looking at English Renaissance theatre in a European context, is why this seemed a satisfactory arrangement to the English and not to anyone else.

Secondly, I have problematized the fact of a male theatre in England, pointing out that the claim of an all-male public stage at the very least needs some serious qualification. But even where the stage was a male preserve, as it certainly was in the commercial theatrical companies of Renaissance England, the theatre was not. The theatre was a place of unusual freedom for women in the period; foreign visitors comment on the fact that English women go to theatre unescorted and unmasked, and a large proportion of the audience consisted of women. The puzzle here would be why a culture that so severely regulated the lives of women in every other sphere suspended its restrictions in the case of theatre. The fact of the large female audience must have had important consequences for the development of English popular drama. It meant that the success