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Introduction: shifting sisters

'Sisters are doin' it for themselves' ran one feminist mantra of the 1980s.[1] Every student of Elizabethan drama learns that, contrariwise, the female roles in Shakespeare's theatre were played by boys and young men whose voices had not yet broken, usually from the ages of about ten to eighteen. Students of Restoration drama discover that in 1660 women began representing themselves on the public stage. How did this cultural transformation come about? And what was the impact on the audience, and on English drama, when 'the woman's part' was indeed performed by a woman? Recent revisionist contributions to English theatre history have overturned the long-held assumption that the Elizabethan public theatre grew out of, and sustained until 1660, a performance tradition that was exclusively male.[2] While the convention of male transvestite performance has received considerable attention, much less interest has been shown in those works, scripted for and by women, in which female theatrical representation is at issue.[3] In this book I wish to widen the range of evidence currently used to guide the questions we ask about 'women and drama' in early modern England. My aim is to investigate the relationship between the idea of the actress in drama and her incarnation on a variety of stages between 1603 and 1670. Rather than viewing the appearance of the professional actress as a decisive change from the past, I demonstrate the literary and theatrical continuities which made her appearance possible. Specifically, I show that the advent of women on the professional stage in 1660 was the outcome of a vigorous debate conducted in the drama and theatrical entertainments of the early Stuart period.

The advent and public acceptance of actresses in the professional Restoration theatres has been seen as a consequence of the familiarity of Charles II and his courtiers with female performance in France, Spain, Italy and Germany, where there was a tradition of women acting in public theatres.[4] In her study *The First English Actresses*, Elizabeth Howe accounts for the welcoming of women on to the public stage by claiming

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that the audiences were similarly exclusive at the Caroline court theatre and the Restoration playhouses: 'It was within the select atmosphere of a particular social group that the first English actresses were introduced and flourished.'[5]

In an earlier, influential essay, Katharine Maus offered a conceptual explanation for the acceptance of women into the professional theatre. Maus argued that the seventeenth century witnessed a major shift in attitude on the part of the playgoing public towards the ideology linking feminine sexuality and the theatre, from condemnation to celebration, accompanied by a shift from a hierarchical to a polar model of sexual relations.[6] While acknowledging the partial validity of these arguments, my study shows that the actress's arrival is part of a much broader shift in the ways women are represented, and are beginning to represent themselves, in the course of the seventeenth century. If we take a long view of the sixty-year period leading up to the Restoration, it is possible to chart changes of attitude towards the idea of the actress in English society, culminating in the experimental operatic productions of William Davenant in the late 1650s in which women sang on a semi-public stage. These changes can be shown to have originated in the innovative theatrical performances of the Danish Queen Anna and the French Queen Henrietta Maria at the early Stuart courts. These two foreign queens were consorts respectively to James VI of Scotland, who ruled England as James I from 1603 to 1625, and his son Charles I, whose reign began in 1625 and culminated in 1642 in the outbreak of the English Civil War. In his cultural biography *Anna of Denmark* Leeds Barroll makes a crucial point about the altered royal situation in England following the forty-five-year reign of the unmarried Elizabeth I. In the case of a married monarch, Barroll writes, the Crown comprised 'a royal duality – theoretically two regal figures, and two courts'.[7] This political division has consequences for the cultural agency exercised by the two queens consort who figure in this study, in particular for their theatrical performances. Elizabeth I conceived of herself as an actor, commenting in 1586, 'We princes, I tell you, are set on stages, in sight and view of all the world.'[8] But no matter how artfully devised the roles Elizabeth played, she remained first and foremost the monarch; her political role was all-pervasive.

By contrast, early in the Jacobean reign the Privy Council expressed strong reservations about the King's proposal for his wife to take part in a masque, alleging 'it were the ready way to change the mirth of Christmas, to offer any conditions where her Majesty's person is an actor'.[9] Underpinning this objection to the Queen's masquing is a patriarchal notion of

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the royal spouse, in which Anna's body or 'person' remains subordinate to her husband as head. The fact that Anna performed in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* notwithstanding the Council's demurral shows the pliability of patriarchal ideology when faced with what Jonson names in *Blackness* as 'her majesty's will'.[10] A royal marriage meant a doubling of the royal prerogative, which in turn opened up possibilities both for marital insubordination and for the activation of the political aspirations of 'a number of ambitious and talented women'.[11]

Hitherto critics have focused on the sociopolitical function of women's masque performances. For the purposes of this book, the importance of the Stuart masque lies in the newly significant and signifying role accorded to female theatrical performance. Hence the first two chapters trace the development of what I call a poetics of female performance in Stuart masques and pastoral entertainments. I argue that these works inaugurate a shift in the conception of female subjectivity, which is represented in drama of the time as fluid, shifting and, most importantly, emergent. Caroline drama demonstrates a new attitude towards female theatricality, previously a focus of ambivalence in Renaissance drama and English culture in general. In this new disposition, the theatrical woman is viewed sympathetically, her outward identity seen either as socially imposed or as a ruse to protect her emotional self. Interestingly, this depiction of femininity as theatrical informs Lady Mary Wroth's prose romance, the *Urania* (1621). Heather Weidemann argues that in the *Urania* Wroth represents women 'not so much as spectacles as revelatory subjects; their appearances often point to a subjective female identity which is hidden but nonetheless authentic'.[12] Weidemann distinguishes the enabling potential of this new identity from the misogynist equation of women and duplicity, one *locus classicus* of which is Hamlet's berating of Ophelia in the nunnery scene, 'I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another' (3.1.145–6). By contrast, in the Stuart literature I examine, female theatricality has a rhetorically productive ambiguity, facilitating both satiric and idealized representations of women. Nonetheless, I argue that one result of women's increasing cultural visibility was a manifest concern on the parts of amateur and professional dramatists with issues of liberty and civility that derive from a sympathetic interest in female selfhood.

My project is therefore a revisionist one, which shares something in common with feminist modes of 'prehistory' or 'counterhistory'. Margaret Ezell has shown how a notion of literary tradition which privileges print technology and professionalism has helped shape an early modern

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canon which marginalizes the work of women who wrote as amateurs within a system of manuscript circulation. In a study which similarly redirects our critical attention, Karen Raber maintains that 'within the genre loosely defined as closet drama . . . women find the dramatic voice they do not achieve in genres intended for the professional theater'.[13] My argument about the occlusion of the actress depends on an expanded notion of Stuart drama, encompassing court and provincial masques, closet plays and pastoral tragicomedies, as well as drama performed in the commercial London theatres. This diversity of forms 'serve[s] to complicate what we understand as the spaces and opportunities for performance, and intellectual engagement with the concept of theatre, that existed for women, and men, in the seventeenth century'.[14]

The inclusiveness of that last phrase is important. For the evidence suggests an openness to change on the part of a sector of English men and women ranging from courtiers to gentlemen travellers to amateur and professional dramatists. Even James's Privy Council, having boldly expressed their misgivings at the idea of the Queen's acting, proceeded to urge James to mount the masques in which Anna would appear at his own expense, simultaneously countenancing the Queen's theatrical performance and registering 'the increased political relevance of royal masquing'.[15] Thirty years later, Sir Lucius Cary, son of the dramatist Elizabeth Cary, expressed his enthusiasm for Queen Henrietta Maria's performance in Walter Montagu's pastoral drama *The Shepherds' Paradise* (1633): 'I must say this, both of it and the great actresse of it, that her action was worthy of it, and it was worthy of hir action, and I beleeve the world can fitt neither of them, but with one another.'[16]

Cary's comment, with its gender-specific term 'actress', reflects an elite culture much more at ease with the active participation of women than the Jacobean court. Even before the controversy fuelled by William Prynne's attack on women actors as 'notorious whores' in his voluminous *Histrio-Mastix* (1633), the topic of female actors is represented as a fashionable talking-point in Caroline drama. As David Scott Kastan has argued, Prynne's tract was 'less the culmination of the [Puritan] attack on the stage . . . than an anachronism at the time of publication'.[17] A resignation to change is evident in John Chamberlain's comment upon Henrietta Maria's acting in Racan's pastoral *Artenice* in 1626: 'I have knowne the time when this wold have seemed a straunge sight, to see a Quene act in a play but *tempora mutantur et nos*.'[18] 'Times change and so do we', says Chamberlain philosophically. His remark supports Michael Shapiro's suggestion that, rather than being anomalous in its retention of

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an all-male public theatre (as Stephen Orgel has argued), England, a Protestant island nation detached from continental Europe, may simply have been slow to change.[19]

EARLY MODERN CONCEPTS OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

This book investigates the relationship betwen female theatricality and women's subjectivity or selfhood as it is represented in early Stuart drama, on stage and in social behaviour. The material I discuss testifies to 'an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of [female] identity as a manipulable, artful process', accompanied by 'a new stress on the executive power of the [female] will'.[20] My study shares elements in common with diverse explorations of early modern women's self-fashioning and their ambivalent status as subjects.[21] The image of the actress converges with the idea of the female subject to the extent that a vocal woman transgressed the patriarchal ideology which worked to keep women out of the public view, discouraging them from speaking, taking the floor or making spectacles of themselves. The conduct book writer Richard Braithwait's injunction to English gentlewomen to 'make your Chamber your private Theatre, wherein you may act some devout scene to God's honour' illustrates this code of confinement in its Caroline form.[22] As a monarch, even Elizabeth I was not immune from moralistic prohibitions on women's self-display, as is clear in this excerpt from Sir Francis Osborne's *Historical Memoires on the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James* (1658): 'Her Sex did beare out many impertinencies in her words and actions, as her making Latin speeches in the Universities, and professing her selfe in publique a Muse, then thought something too Theatrical for a virgine Prince.'[23]

Osborne constructs Elizabeth's theatricality as conflicting with her femininity, or her status as a 'virgine Prince'. Elizabeth's display of her learning and presentation of herself as a muse are forms of assertiveness which Osborne represents as 'impertinencies' in respect of the Queen's gender. At the same time, Osborne's account of Elizabeth suggests a subtle shift of response towards this performative femininity: the Queen's behaviour he writes, was '*then* thought something too Theatrical for a virgine Prince'. His remark testifies to a shift of attitude, and an alteration of circumstance taking place between Elizabeth's reign and the time of Osborne's writing, shortly before the Stuart Restoration. While Elizabeth was extolled as a phoenix, authoritative female self-fashioners of the Stuart generation are more numerous: Queens Anna and Henrietta Maria,

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Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and Katherine Philips, 'the matchless Orinda', come immediately to mind. In their theatrical and literary self-representations, these women steered a path through the female subjection enshrined in biblical and legal writings. Thomas Edgar, the putative author of *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (1632), explains the situation of women as wives in early Stuart England. After his citation of God's cursing of Eve in the third chapter of *Genesis*, Edgar adds the following comment:

> See here the reason . . . that Women have no voyse in Parliament, They make no Lawes, they consent to none, they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to bee married and their desires or [are] subject to their husband, I know no remedy though *some women can shift it well enough*.[24]

The modification 'some women can shift it well enough' suggests a gap between patriarchal ideology and women's lived experience. As both verb and noun the word 'shift' suggests physical effort, an action or attitude to which one is forced by particular circumstances. How well women could 'make shift', or perform in their given situation, depended, among other things, on their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The 'poor shifting sisters' invoked by Middleton and Dekker's Moll Cutpurse share a vulnerability to sexual and financial exploitation with 'distressed needle-women and tradefallen wives'.[25] Conversely, the idea of a shift in the sense of a theatrical expedient or stratagem offsets Margaret Cavendish's pessimistic appraisal of women's status. Noting the exclusion of women from political office, Cavendish comments, 'if we be not citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be subjects in the Commonwealth: and the truth is, we are no subjects, unless it be to our husbands, *and not always to them, for sometimes we usurp their authority, or else by flattery we get their good wills to govern*'.[26] Cavendish theorizes the possibility of a wife becoming what Shakespeare's Orsino calls '[her] master's mistress' (5.1.323) either through outright 'usurpation' or by the more subtle shift of flattery. Such attribution of agency to women is facilitated in Stuart literature by the discourses of Neoplatonism and *honnêteté*, about which I say more later in this Introduction. The distinctiveness of Stuart representations of female identity and agency derives from their simultaneous embracing of and recoiling from women's use of theatrical arts.

Feminist scholars have observed that 'the notion of the husband's legal right to a woman's body and mind was . . . being contested in the [early modern] period'.[27] Evidence of a woman's ability to 'shift it', or to

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secure a space for herself strategically in her domestic relationships, is found in the speech and actions of Maria, the heroine of *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed* (1611), John Fletcher's Jacobean riposte to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592). Maria counters her sister's attempt to dissuade her from withholding her sexual delights from Petruchio with words which seriously undermine the concept of wifely subjection:

> A weaker subject
> Would shame the end I aime at: disobedience?
> You talk too tamely: By the faith I have
> In mine own Noble will, that childish woman
> That lives a prisoner to her husbands pleasure,
> Has lost her making, and becomes a beast,
> Created for his use, not fellowship.

Buttressed by the Protestant ideal of equality in the state of marriage, Maria asserts a sense of herself as an independent being, encapsulated in the phrase 'mine own Noble will'. The epilogue added for the 1633 revival of the play at the Blackfriars and the Caroline court elaborates Fletcher's intention as 'to teach both Sexes due equality, / And as they stand bound, to love mutually'.[28] This instruction resonates with the representation of the marriage between Charles I and Henrietta Maria in their early masques. As Roy Strong remarks, 'Charles and Henrietta Maria are the first royal couple to be glorified in the domestic sense.'[29] The presentation of their marriage in idyllic terms followed a strife-torn first five years soured by the King's dismissal of a large part of the Queen's extensive Catholic retinue in 1626. After the assassination of Charles's close friend George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, in 1629, Henrietta moved to secure first place in her husband's affections. The first extant Caroline masque, Jonson's *Love's Triumph through Callipolis* (1631), mythologizes the royal marriage as a compound of 'heroic love' and ideal beauty, stressing that 'where love is mutual, still / All things in order move'.[30] The language of Henrietta's favoured form of Christian Neoplatonism is evident in the emblem of 'Beauty and Love, whose story is mysterial' (184). Henrietta Maria has recently been described as 'one of the most . . . intellectually driven women of her day'.[31] As the Catholic bride to a Protestant king, she bore the responsibility of pursuing the cause of Catholics in her adopted country. Her masques may be seen as 'strata-stratagems of persuasion', to use Alison Shell's term, indirectly promoting her faith through dramatizing 'the all-conquering power of a feminised religious love'. Shell notes the consistency of this project with the Pauline

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injunction for wives of the true faith married to unbelieving husbands to 'use indirect means to convert them', adding, 'to call this feminist is misleading; but, paradoxically, it counts among the incentives that prompted early modern women towards finding a voice'.[32]

Less paradoxical, in terms of providing inspiration for women actors and authors, was Henrietta's performance in and sponsorship of a feminized pastoral drama. The influence of this cultural trend may be seen in the Interregnum dramatic writings of the Cavendish women: the sisters, Lady Jane Cavendish and Lady Elizabeth Brackley, and their stepmother, Margaret Cavendish, née Lucas. In *The Concealed Fancies*, the household drama composed in the mid-1640s by the Cavendish sisters, theatrical self-fashioning works simultaneously in the service of female fantasy and of a shrewd domestic pragmatism. One of the claims this book makes is that the performative culture of the Stuart courts created a sphere in which elite women exerted influence and authority; that culture was profoundly inspiring for literary and theatrically minded women.[33]

This book's primary aim is to explore the literary and social ramifications of the new status of women as actors and patrons of theatrical culture at the early Stuart courts. The rest of this introduction outlines in greater detail the contexts and premises of the book's arguments. As part of that, it is necessary to sketch more closely the cultural pursuits and personal styles of the two histrionic women who functioned as royal figureheads throughout the period I examine.

THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF THE STUART QUEENS CONSORT

As natives, respectively, of Denmark and France, Queens Anna (1574–1619) and Henrietta Maria (1609–69) acted as conduits for the transmission of European baroque culture to early Stuart England.[34] It is worth remembering that at this time, for English writers, musicians and artists, continental travel and employment was a staple of their professional development: the lutenist and composer John Dowland was resident in Denmark between 1598 and 1606; the architect Inigo Jones toured extensively in Italy and France, while the courtier dramatist Walter Montagu heard Monteverdi conduct his own works in Venice and twice visited the artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Sicily.[35] Thus, in fostering female performance, and in their further artistic patronage, Anna and Henrietta Maria were accelerating a process of cultural exchange and transformation which was already underway.

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For Anna of Denmark artistic patronage arguably provided a substitute for the political intriguing in which she had engaged in Scotland.[36] In England, with a strong consensus of nobles supporting James's rule, her options for political engagement were limited. However, she formed strong links with 'the Essex circle' which clustered around the figure of Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, whose husband was one of three earls who rode with Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, in his abortive rebellion of 1601. At the accession of James I in 1603, Russell won the privileged place of lady of the Bed Chamber to Queen Anna; as well as dancing in masques, her prominence as a theatrical patron is reflected in her role as dedicatee of two Jacobean women's masques, Samuel Daniel's *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* (1604) and Robert White's *Cupid's Banishment* (1617). The poet Daniel held the position of groom of the Privy Chamber in Anna's household, as did the linguist John Florio. The patronage orbit of the Essex group included the playwrights Ben Jonson and George Chapman and the poet John Donne; the group comprised other female patrons such as Susan de Vere, who in 1621, as Countess of Montgomery, received the dedication of the *Urania*, the prose romance authored by Lady Mary Wroth, the daughter of Robert Sidney, a poet and Anna's Lord Chamberlain.

Barroll ambitiously describes Anna as 'the important precipitant of that "atmosphere" of high cultural patronage which we associate with the early Stuart court' (Figure 1).[37] Anna's success in establishing herself as a cynosure on a par with, or rivalling, James may be gauged by a reference in a letter of John Chamberlain to the palace of Somerset House on the Strand as 'Quenes court'.[38] Chamberlain's letter reports the marriage at Somerset House of Anna's lady-in-waiting Jane Drummond to the Earl of Roxborough in February 1614, an occasion which was graced by Daniel's pastoral *Hymen's Triumph* (pub. 1615), commissioned by Anna to celebrate the completion of renovations to the building.[39] This performance postdated Anna's active masquing career, which lasted some eight years from 1603 to 1611; during this period she performed in six extant masques, but after the death of Prince Henry in 1612 she ceased participating as a masquer. However, Anna maintained her interest in performance until the end of her life; in 1617 she was entertained with a *ballet de cour* by her French musicians, and in the same year she was the chief spectator and addressee of White's *Cupid's Banishment*, a masque performed at her Greenwich court by young schoolgirls.[40]

Clare McManus posits the innovation of female masquing speech in *Cupid's Banishment* as the culmination of tendencies manifested within

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Figure 1. Paul van Somer, *Anna of Denmark*, 1617.

earlier Jacobean queen's masques and she argues that 'Anna's court performances stood as a significant precedent for the development of courtly and professional female performance in the Caroline court'.[41] Using the framework employed by Malcolm Smuts to describe the emergence of a royalist court culture in early Stuart England, we may characterize the years of Anna's influence as a transitional period,

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