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978-0-521-83956-3 - Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama

Alison Findlay

Excerpt

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Henri Lefebvre, probably the most enigmatic and intriguing analyst of spatial practice, argues that 'space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also a *stake*, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of *wagers* on the future – wagers which are articulated, if never completely'.¹ Lefebvre's model for reading space identifies it as a liminal zone between past and future, hence temporal as well as topographical. It is Janus-faced: constituted as an expression of existing power structures and simultaneously constituting the potential for challenging those structures. At any specific moment, space is the product or result of given cultural practice, the means by which one is assigned a place. The interests of particular groups are represented in such spatial configurations while the interests of others are disadvantaged. Space is the grid that commands bodies, prescribes and proscribes movements and gestures. At the same time, and in contrast, space is a producer of change, the vehicle through which alternative futures can be explored. It is a movement from one's given place, a field where strategic investment in a different spatial and cultural practice can be enacted. Space is therefore a gamble: the investment of agency is staked or risked in order to produce a future that will re-place the individual to his or her advantage.

The playing spaces of early women's drama, which I explore in this book, exemplify the paradox of restriction and possibility identified by Lefebvre. The venues where women composed and performed drama can be read in terms of the grid of spatial practices that framed their minds and bodies according to a set of values that privileged their male counterparts. The title page of Brathwait's *English Gentlewoman* (1631) (Figure 1), shows how the virtuous woman was ideologically and physically produced in a series of clearly bounded arenas. Decency, for example, 'accommodates her selfe to the *place* wherein she lives'.² Female script-writers and actors likewise worked from the prescriptions and



Figure 1. Title page of Richard Brathwait's *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), 4° B.25. Art.
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proscriptions of the various sites in which they were placed by patriarchal society. Their drama was given concrete boundaries, both physical and cultural, by the venues in which it was created. Nevertheless, drama superimposes a fictional setting onto the venue of one's given place. Setting, the second type of playing space I explore, is not limited in the same way as venue. Imaginative and physical freedom offers opportunities for playing with space. Settings can therefore be read in relation to new modes of spatial practice enacted by female playwrights and performers to critically re-mobilise the existing structures of which they were a product.

To engage actively as producers of spatial practice was, as Lefebvre recognises, a strategic investment and a risk. For women playwrights and performers, drama was a wager of their intellectual and physical endeavour that usually involved risks to their reputations. By producing plays they entered a space that was 'at once result and cause, product and producer'. The relationship between venues and settings is thus a crucial nexus for the study of women's agency. The deployment of space in early women's drama both before and after the Restoration was strategic; it was, in Lefebvre's terms, a stake on which wagers for the futures of characters, authors, and womankind more generally, could be articulated. Women who chose this genre knew both the risks and the rewards. A sense of place is often a significant dimension of early modern women's writing, in the settings of poems, scenes in romances, or the real and imaginative sites evoked in religious meditations for example. However, in scripts, venue and setting are absolutely crucial determinants of meaning. Women who composed plays in preference to prose or poetry, and in spite of having no immediate public venue in which to perform before 1660, did so with a keen awareness that drama constitutes a more immediate expression of spatial practice than any other form of literature. It is a genre designed to generate, or to be exploited within, a spatial practice. As such, it provided the best expression of their ideas about woman's place, both physically and culturally. It was a vehicle through which their own spatial experiences could be translated into play, and through which they could lament, reject, criticise, celebrate and, most importantly, renegotiate their place in the world. Drama constituted a route for transforming place into space.

DRAMA, PLACE AND SPACE

Critical negotiations of the terms 'place' and 'space' are notoriously complex, sometimes even contradictory. Like a dramatic performance, any conceptual distinction between them is a matter of contested interpretation

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rather than straightforwardly referential. Such elasticity does, however, lend itself well to the analysis of multiple levels of signification in dramatic practice. De Certeau's definition of space '*as a practiced place*' is useful for reading drama. He distinguishes between 'place', a static location governed by the rule of the 'proper' which situates each element in a distinct position, and 'space' as the effect of active operations that intersect within a place to actualise it or mobilise it in a range of different ways. To illustrate, he offers the examples of a street designed by urban planning as a place that is transformed into a space by the practice of walkers, and the example of a written text transformed into space by the practice of reading.³ Drama draws on both these types of practice to produce a multi-layered interaction between place and space. Its written script is a practised place, in that it spatialises (mobilises and interprets) the places of everyday life in its representations of actions within defined settings. An early modern woman who chooses to write a play is thus already *practising* place, mobilising and perhaps challenging the 'proper' positions allotted to her in a given social and physical order, through her writing. Even if the script is not produced, it remains a form of spatial practice.

At the same time, the written script is a place: it fixes boundaries around the action by allotting each element a 'proper' position, spatially and temporally, in the play, giving each a local habitation and a name. In the case of women's drama, the local habitation is, of course, a place created or authored by a woman. As such it can be radically different from its everyday equivalent, a place where the constituent elements 'emerging from their stability, transform the place where they lay motionless into the foreignness of their own space', to use De Certeau's words (p. 118). The static, given dimension of the script can be likened to his term 'region': the space determined by a particular interaction, in this case the interaction or interlocution between the female author and the place(s) she chooses to set her play.

Performance mobilises the script in a second round of spatial practices that overlay those of the author. The presence of actors and objects on the fixed place of the stage puts all the elements of the script into polyphonic play within the ludic arena created by performance. Early modern drama thus charts the environment differently from either the story or the map. Unlike the story, it appears to limit interpretation by the choice of actors, costumes, movements, but the stage's own theatrical self-consciousness (which reminds spectators that this is a fictional performance), inevitably makes those interpretations provisional. The provisional nature of a play's interpretation of place allows it to incorporate a historical contingency or

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sense of 'process' that De Certeau argues is eliminated in early modern maps. He sees maps as 'a totalising stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a "state" of knowledge', but complains that they are guilty of pushing offstage the operations of which they are the result or necessary condition 'as if into the wings' (p. 121). Early drama by women works differently. Like the map, it combines elements from a received tradition (place) and those produced by the observations of all those involved in the production, but not on 'a totalising stage' which simply presents a product. Instead, performance physically enacts the play's journey or narrative through space and time. Its spatial processes are the essence of dramatic action. Drawing attention to the operations of spatial practice can raise critical consciousness about the status quo, even if the play does not create a better alternative.

Far from converting space into place, then, early women's drama re-converts set place into active space. Its characteristic *jouissance* subverts the rules of the same by overthrowing ideas about appropriateness, reintroducing sensuality (the language of the body, the physical present). The abundant, creative playing arena offers a fluid, dynamic field with which spectators engage in the making of meanings. In particular, it transgresses boundaries. Early women's drama frequently sets out to activate flexible relationships between venues and settings, a process that raises scepticism about existing structures (physical and cultural, material and psychological).

VENUE AND SETTING

My book's concentration on venue and setting distinguishes between physical movement through space and the action of interpreting spatial orientation. I explore the venues of composition and performance as sites of physical movement through space, while the dramatic scripts are spatial interpretations of place. Fictional settings, the *mise-en-scène*, creatively interpret the sites on which they are based. The interaction between venue and setting in drama thus produces an active reproduction of space in a heightened, self-conscious way. For early modern women, the venues of composition and potential performance were the sites of lived spatial practice. Like Brathwair's English Gentlewoman, their subjectivities and dramatic outputs were constructed within the given frames of the rooms, buildings and outside arenas that they occupied. Philosophers Henri Bergson and Gaston Bachelard have argued that space is fundamental to psychological and emotional existence, that the very structure of our mind

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is tied to locality.⁴ *Playing Spaces* takes that idea as a starting point to treat venue in a broad sense as the place of literary and imagined production. In so doing, I argue that the places where the dramatists lived and wrote are embedded in the texts and that the plays often draw on those surroundings for dramatic effect. The power of memory and its topophilic manifestation, as theorised by Bachelard, is used to read Margaret Cavendish's play *The Religious*, for example. Brief information about architecture, furnishings, location is presented as a context for reading the plays. Thus, the gardens at Nonsuch and its banqueting house are explored as venues that, almost invisibly, become the settings for Jane Lumley's translation of *Iphigenia*. I argue that Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *Pastorall*, discussed in chapter 2, makes active use of Bolsover Castle, one of the family estates, for its effects.

I believe it is important to think of early women's plays as coterie dramas, texts that are specifically 'placed' in that they depend on a particular venue and community of spectators for their effects. Theatre is a social event where spectators and actors are participants, so I draw attention to the relationships between them in cases like royal entertainments, where information is easily recoverable and is obviously a vital element of the theatrical occasion. In addition, I endeavour to construct some potential 'audiences' for communal readings or household performances by examining the social circles within which the writers moved, such as in my analysis of Mary Sidney Herbert's *Tragedie of Antonie* and the literary circle which made up part of her extended household. It is important to remember that reading could be a communal, social activity as well as a solitary one.⁵ Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* describes a room in which Princess Dalina has been reading aloud to her gentlewomen while they sew, while Margaret Cavendish reported her husband's and Ben Jonson's skill in play reading.⁶

Considering the effects of performance in such venues is an important way to restore a spatial dimension to the plays. In many cases, the venues are the dramatists' aristocratic households; the chapters on 'Homes' and 'Gardens' argue my conviction that the plays have been written with those specific venues in mind. In the case of female performances in court theatricals, venues are much easier to establish. The effects generated by the architecture of buildings like Hampton Court and the Stuart Banqueting Houses or the country estates of Kenilworth or Cowdray are considered in chapter 3. The social meanings of those venues as households or theatres belonging to the King, Queen or courtier, also exert a significant influence on the dramatic effects produced there. Similarly, the architectural and

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cultural significance of enclosed venues such as abbeys, convents and churches is an important factor in the construction of female-centred drama, as chapter 4 examines. In the case of most post-1660 scripted drama (though significantly not the work of Margaret Cavendish), venues can be identified, and the specific construction and location of the theatres factored in as part of theatrical effects generated by women's plays.

Lines spoken or sung, movement and dance all acquire meaning through their relationships with material venues. Discussion considers how venues positioned the female performers and writers, and the ways in which those women inserted themselves into existing structures or manipulated them in their own interests. By looking at how and where drama takes place, this book also examines the appropriation of traditionally male spaces by women. In a production, a fictional text literally 'takes' place and remakes it through performance. In the process of superimposing a fictional setting onto a space demarcated for performance, it puts assumptions on trial, in the manner imagined by Lefebvre: 'Trial by space invariably reaches a dramatic moment, that moment when whatever is being tried – philosophy or religion, ideology or established knowledge, capitalism or socialism, state or community – is put radically into question' (p. 417).

The setting of a play is the other vital component in its spatial configuration. Luckily, this is much easier to establish than venue, and all early women dramatists, I would argue, are acutely sensitive to the resonances of place in their choices of setting. Hanna Scolnicov's book *Woman's Theatrical Space* argues that the changing spatial conventions in drama, such as indoor and outside scenes, doorways and window scenes are 'faithful expressions of the growing awareness of the specificity of gender differences and the changing attitudes to woman and her sexuality'.⁷ Her study is mainly confined to male-authored drama but provides some excellent starting points for analysing early plays by women. Here, we have evidence that the overarching fictional worlds, the scenic division of space into specific locations by means of inclusion and exclusion, and the physical dimension of pivotal moments in the drama are carefully constructed through the scripts. Settings are often intrinsically linked to genre, so the discussion of, for example, rural scenes in the drama of Rachel Fane or Cavendish and Brackley involves an examination of their use of pastoral. Similarly, the city dramas of Elizabeth Polwhele, Aphra Behn and Mary Pix are particular engagements with the conventions of Restoration comedy, although detailed examinations of genre are beyond my scope here.

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PERFORMANCE AND SPATIAL PRACTICE

My book's aim to explore the spatial dimension of early women's drama is, like that drama, characterised by strategic risk. Although space is the most crucial dimension of theatre, its deployment by early women has received relatively little attention.⁸ Important work on masques and post-Restoration drama, where we are lucky to have material traces of performance, has been undertaken. Designs, eye-witness accounts, and records of the buildings used as venues allow us partially to reconstruct the ephemeral theatrical occasions fashioned by women. Clare McManus's *Women on the Renaissance Stage* and many of the fine essays in *Women and Culture at the Court of the Stuart Queens* have successfully identified examples of female agency in the construction of court entertainments. Paula Backscheider's *Spectacular Politics* deftly analyses the theatrical quality of the Restoration court and its relationship to professional drama to which women contributed, while studies of Aphra Behn use evidence about play-houses and performers to reveal her expertise as a theatrical craftswoman.⁹

It is much more difficult to construct theatre histories for other entertainments penned or performed by female hands, bodies and voices from the medieval period to the Restoration. All the information about any possible production is contained within the texts themselves. The lack of substantial external evidence for contemporary performance has led critics to envisage different kinds of dramatic production, from the extremes of private composition and solitary, silent reading to fully realised household theatricals. Katherine Acheson has argued that women's closet drama exhibits a resistance to performance, an 'anti-theatricality' shared by female protagonists who refuse to perform or do so only reluctantly.¹⁰ Karen Raber's comparative study of plays by men and women reads closet drama as the writerly product of a literary elite that comments on theatrical practice rather than enacting it. Closet drama is, she argues, 'drama that does *not* function as theater'. Her carefully nuanced analysis of the relationships between class, gender and genre sees 'this classical style of nontheatrical drama' as a site in which women could examine what it means to have a voice in Renaissance English culture. Raber links closet drama to the printed dialogue and recitation of pastoral verse in eclogues, arguing that the different dramatic personae in these forms allowed women to 'represent the self' through heightened or consciously produced modes of speech in opposition to the multi-vocality of theatre.¹¹

Marta Straznický's *Privacy, Playreading and Women's Closet Drama* focuses differently on the practices of reading and the mediums of

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manuscript circulation and print, to propose that women's dramatic writing moves strategically between so-called public and private realms, frequently engaging with a public arena while apparently retreating from it. Women's decision to write closet drama is not, she argues, a symptom of their exclusion from a privileged, public stage, but a tactical manoeuvre that licensed particular forms of engagement with the social and economic politics of the public arena.¹² In this sense, the closet is both a closed and a subversively open space; anything produced there (written, spoken or acted) is beyond the censorship of the Revels and therefore uncontainable. The illusion is easily maintained in cases where scripts remain in manuscript copies, as in the case of Lady Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory* for example. When copies of a woman's play appeared in print, however, as with Lady Mary Sidney's translation of Garnier's *Tragedy of Antonie* or Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*, its author could avoid public censure only by insisting that her play was not performed on the public stage.

Straznicki usefully points out that a culture of private dramatic production does not necessarily oppose performance, since play reading and courtly or academic stages are all venues belonging to an elite, private culture. Even silent reading invokes imaginative constructions of performance, including spatial practice.¹³ A preface to Margaret Cavendish's 1662 collection of *Plays*, for example, tells her readers that 'they must not read a Scene as they would read a Chapter; for Scenes must be read as if they were spoke or Acted'. When read skilfully, 'the very sound of the Voice that enters through the Ears, doth present the Actions to the Eyes of the Fancy as lively as if it were really Acted'.¹⁴ Here, stage space is constructed imaginatively by any reader to establish a perspective from which s/he can view the fictional world represented and simultaneously assess its relationship to his/her own world. Closet plays are not opposed to theatricality *per se*. That they *can* be performed has certainly been established through practice in the case of several scripts.¹⁵ The Women and Dramatic Production project that I co-directed with Stephanie Hodgson-Wright and Gweno Williams demonstrated the multi-dimensional quality of early dramas penned by women. The idea that such texts were never intended for performance has now been rendered questionable.

We have thus reached a new critical frontier. To argue the performability of early women's drama is insufficient, but to move ahead and try to put such plays in their place as theatre, we must enter unknown territory. We cannot access material traces of any original productions so, inevitably, any attempt to construct or reconstruct theatrical realisations of these plays is highly speculative. Crossing that frontier is, like Lefebvre's definition of

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space itself, a gamble, a wager to create a place from which to develop new critical understandings of early women's drama. This book's study of venues and settings constitutes a strategic attempt to fill the spaces of performance that are in some cases blank and in others sketched in through scraps of material evidence. By focusing particularly on the relationship between venues and settings I hope to open up the playing spaces *for* women's drama as determinants of meaning and to show how women played *with* space in scripts and performances as a form of political intervention.

The interaction between setting and venue is the crucible in which dramatic spatial practice is forged. What different effects are created when a prison scene is played in an aristocratic household (as in Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*), and on the stage of a professional theatre (as in Polwhele's *The Frolics*), for example? How does the representation of supernatural deities change when they move from a purpose-built Banqueting House to the hallway of an aristocratic household? To answer questions like these that preoccupy my book throughout, we need an analysis of theatre space that accounts for its complex, multi-layered quality. Lefebvre's categorisation of space includes, alongside 'spatial practice', two other modes that are appropriate to reading the interactions between lived, perceived and conceived space in theatre.

First, he defines 'Representations of space' as the abstract codes and signs which are conceived to impose an 'order' on space. These are the models of planners and social engineers, intellectually formulated through systems of signs, that dominate our perceptions of the world around us. Second, he defines 'Representational' or symbolic space, which is sometimes coded, sometimes not, as 'space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols'. Closely connected to the realm of art, and taking its source from individual and communal histories, 'it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects'.¹⁶ Representational spaces are those local anchors for our psychological and emotional being, such as bedrooms, dwellings, houses, tunnels, holes, passages, labyrinths, churches. They are the places fetishised in order to fill the spaces of lack. Using Lefebvre's terms, I will argue that a performance space is both a representation of space (a critical, creative intervention into spatial texture which imposes an order) and a representational space, lived through its associations and images. It is, moreover, a space that is produced to be read and lived, at least temporarily, by the spectators and the actors. Participants read the stage with a dual consciousness; theatre is both truth (live bodies in a real place) and fiction, so they can appreciate a performance on