Preliminary: the persistence of all-male theatre

Why were there no women on the Elizabethan public stage? This book is about the original performers of Shakespeare's female roles and how they, and the possibilities and limitations of the representational tradition in which they worked, may have influenced his conception. We do not know for certain any of the individuals concerned but we do know they were all male. To our society it seems odd if not perverse to have excluded women from playing their own gender. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin by considering why, in England at least, it was not acceptable for women to appear on the public stage until after the Restoration in 1660.

There is evidence of their widespread use in the earlier periods of theatre in other European countries, although mainly in non-speaking roles. The silent figure of the 'very beautiful girl who looks after Zeus's thunderbolts for him' in Aristophanes' *The Birds*, and becomes Peisthetaerus's prize at the end of the play, may well have been played by a woman. Women were prominent in the Roman *Mime* tradition. In the princely Renaissance spectacles women danced, sang, and posed naked. On the Continent it seems to have become acceptable for women to perform in religious plays by the thirteenth century, as well as in aristocratic imitations of New Comedy by the early sixteenth. The first professional actress recorded in France appears to have been in 1545.[1] Italian actresses performed before Henry II and Catherine de' Medici at Lyons in 1548, and at about the same time they seem to have become established in their native country when the first permanent theatres housing regular companies were opened. Spain eventually followed suit by the end of the century. Actresses appeared on the Dutch stage at its inception in 1655. Only the Papal States resisted the spread of women longer than England, and cross-dressing was still in operation in Rome when Goethe visited in 1788.

In England the evidence of women performing in public before 1660 is uncertain. Robert Busse, Abbot-elect of Tavistock, was accused in 1324 of giving away valuable trinkets 'to actors, *actresses*, whores and other loose

and disreputable persons' (my emphasis).[2] There is some debate as to whether the Wives of Chester performed or merely organised the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the town's Corpus Christi Cycle. In respect of the Elizabethan and Jacobean public stage most of the recent evidence of female performance offered by scholars refers to activities other than acting (such as singing, dancing, or posing), and these outside conventional theatre; or it relates to amateur, mostly courtly, activities where the proprieties depended not only on the extent to which they were private but also whether they took place in Whitehall or in the provinces, along with some greater freedom for younger performers; or it relates to foreign touring companies, as may be the case in Thomas Coryat's reference to female performance, 'I have heard that it hath been sometimes used in London.'[3] Only a single reference by Richard Madox in 1583 seems to offer the possibility of direct evidence:

> went to the theater to see a scurvie play set out al by one virgin, which there proved a fyemarten without voice, so that we stayed not the matter.

Mrs Colman in *The Siege of Rhodes* in 1656 is generally cited as the first British actress, but it was not until 1660 that women began to appear regularly, a practice formalised by Charles II in his patent of two years later, and much encouraged by him; as Cibber put it so delicately of the new recruits to the stage, 'more than one of them had charms sufficient at their leisure hours to mollify the cares of Empire'. It is fair to say, however, that by 1660 attitudes to gender and its representation as well as the content of plays had changed and the English practice of all-male performance was widely seen to be anachronistic. Charles had visited George Jolly's English touring company in Frankfurt in 1655 which incorporated actresses, probably German ones, and the Court in exile had plenty of opportunity during the Interregnum to become familiar with the practice in France, and included at different times both Killigrew and Davenant, the two subsequent Restoration managers. There was briefly some resistance in England from the established actors, hurrying to re-form for the King's return and recruiting new male actors to play the female roles, but this was soon overcome, although for a short period both men and women played female roles.

Madox says of the woman he saw on the stage that she lacked a 'voice'. This might mean her voice did not carry in an open amphitheatre. Certain registers are more difficult to hear out-of-doors. On the other hand, it might mean her voice was untrained. One reason adduced for using boys rather than women was because boys had opportunities to be trained in

singing and oratory that women lacked, and dramatic verse, far from being everyday speech, was a highly wrought form deemed to require such training.[4] Related to this was widespread illiteracy amongst women, which would make learning parts more difficult; less than 10 per cent of women could read, and most could not even write their names.[5] It did not, however, prevent, for instance, a young woman playing the title role in the *Mystère de St Catherine* at Metz in 1468, and it scarcely explains the variation of practice between the different countries.[6]

One factor that might have some bearing on the absence of women from the Elizabethan stage was the acknowledged quality of English male performance, developed over a period of a hundred years of professional playing. Visitors to Europe comment unfavourably not only on the morals but also on the standard of acting they found there, as Thomas Nashe:

> Our Players are not as the players beyond Sea, a sort of squirting bawdie Comedians, that haue whores and common Curtizens to playe womens partes, and forbeare no immodest speech or vnchaste action that may procure laughter . . .

Thomas Coryat is surprised at the quality of Italian actresses when he visits Venice in 1608, that 'they performed . . . with as good a grace, action, gesture, and whatsoever convenient for a Player, as ever I saw any masculine Actor'. Not only does Nashe contrast the quality of the performers between the two countries but also their dramatic fare:

> our Sceane more statelye furnisht than euer it was in the time of *Roscius*, our representations honourable, and full of gallant resolution, not consisting like theirs of a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but of Emperours, Kings and Princes; whose true Tragedies (*Sophocleo cothurno*) they do vaunt.

Michael Shapiro offers a series of practical reasons for continuing to use male performers to represent women on the English as distinct from the Continental stage: 'such factors as protection of male employment, the maintenance of recruitment and training systems already in place, the lack of a pool of potential actresses, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of touring with women'.[7] Another reason may well have been the developing role of theatre in a distinctive Protestant bourgeois culture. The Tudor moralities of the early itinerant professional troupes, influenced by the Medieval mystery cycles of the proto-bourgeois city guilds, developed an aesthetic of profit and pleasure in which didacticism was conceived as an inherent part and the drama's chief social justification (and in this context it is particularly unhelpful to apply the term 'Renaissance' to a drama that has its roots so firmly in the Middle Ages.) It was not a long step from

generating plays to lecture one social group, the young, in the late hybrid educational moralities, to the targeting of another, the female spectator.

Shorn of traditional certainties and in a society experiencing rapid social and economic change, this developing culture shows evidence of considerable anxiety about the emerging 'problem' of women. Jean Howard stresses the extent to which the sixteenth century was concerned with controlling women because of the destructive consequences of their sexual appetites.[8] 'The disciplining and restraint of women increased during this period', she says, 'particularly where economic change was most rapid and changes in family form most pronounced.' Furthermore, there was an 'outpouring of books on housewifery and female piety after the 1580s', and it is arguable that, at least in the hands of some dramatists, theatre became an extension of that process. Puritanism was a broad movement and whilst it is often associated with the anti-theatricalists, it also embraced, as Margot Heinemann has shown, many of the theatre practitioners too.[9] Although Howard later argues that the theatre was often a site for challenges to hegemonic attitudes rather than merely a means of disseminating them,[10] nonetheless an inspection of the surviving canon of plays reveals just how far the theatre of the late 1590s and the early years of the seventeenth century was hijacked by Heywood, Dekker, and their considerable penumbra to serve the ends of the bourgeois culture's anxiety about women, and chapter 4 below shows the extent of this movement. With female characters carefully crafted to show models of good behaviour and the dangers of sexual transgression, it might well have been assumed that the cross-dressed tradition was essential for their effective transmission. Only an experienced male actor, it might be argued, could adequately portray the impossible virtue of a Patient Griselda or the monstrous concupiscence of a Lucretia Borgia. An actress, as now, could only have humanised them, and that would have taken away from their didactic intent.

As well as practical reasons for the continuance of all-male playing, there also appears to have been a series of rooted objections to the concept of female performance.

'PLAYING THE WOMAN'S PART'

There is a complex web of meanings around this single phrase. Not all the uses of the term are hostile. Some in Shakespeare are merely descriptive. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV.iv.158f., Julia, pretending to be a page, tells her new mistress that she as a youth once played 'the woman's part' in a

play as Ariadne lamenting her abandonment by Theseus so that it reduced her former mistress to tears, perhaps with some suggestion of it being a woman's natural place to grieve. Similarly in *Twelfth Night*, I.iv, Orsino urges Viola's youth, 'all semblative of a woman's part', as making Cesario a suitable messenger, whose smooth lip and light voice Olivia will find persuasive, but in combination with the masculine boldness that Orsino requires in representing his unrequited love: 'Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds.'

More significantly, however, in terms of its range of meaning, Posthumus in *Cymbeline*, believing his wife to be unfaithful, uses the same phrase to assert the definitive woman's role as dissembling whore:

> It is the woman's part: be it lying, note it,
> The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers;
> Lust and rank thoughts, hers; hers revenges, hers;
> Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,
> Nice longing, slanders, mutability . . . (II.v.22–6)[11]

Women in this vision are not divided into chaste and lascivious, but either are frank in their lasciviousness or use a show of virtue to conceal it, and this seems to have been the assumption behind much male stage representation of the female from the earliest times. A ninth-century epitaph thought to be to the mime Vitalis, and put into his mouth, in celebrating his versatility draws attention to his imitation of the mask of female modesty:

> How oft did they laugh to see, as I mimicked a dainty wife,
> My gestures so womanly quaint, the shy blush done to the life![12]

Thomas Godwin in *Romanae Historiae Anthologiae*, 1606, compares the Roman mime to the clowns of his own day who 'go a tip-toe in derision of the mincing dames'.[13] *King Lear* provides a third version of the same topos:

> Behold yond simp'ring dame,
> Whose face between her forks presages snow;
> That minces virtue, and does shake the head
> To hear of pleasure's name –

Her virtue is pretence. Only her face announces chastity. Beneath the waist:

> is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness,
> There's the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
> Stench, consumption. (IV.vi.118f.)

Both 'playing' and 'part' could, of course, be given even more overtly sexual meanings. It is from the period immediately before the closure of the

theatres in 1642, when direct comparisons with established theatres using actresses in France, Italy, and Spain generated an increasing awareness of what the English theatre was being denied, and moreover whilst such change was still being resisted, that the most deeply held prejudices against female performers emerged. In a poem published by Randolph in 1638, the poet, seeking to answer why the elderly Lesbia should so indulge her lover, the play-boy Histrio, concludes:

> Then this I can no better reason tell;
> 'Tis 'cause he playes the womans part so well.[14]

Randolph goes on to describe what hard work it is to satisfy her sexual demands. Hence 'Playing the woman's part' now combines a pun on the young man's profession with a third sense, the stimulation of the female genitalia. This then is the undertow of two other references in the 1630s to female actresses. Brome's *Court Beggar* performed in 1632 contains the passage (v.ii): 'the boy's a pretty Actor; and his mother can play her part; women-Actors now grow in request'; and in Shirley's *The Ball*, also 1632, a foolish character describing the French theatre says: 'Yet the women are the best actors, they play / Their own parts, a thing much desir'd in England by some ladies, Inns-o'-Court gentlemen and others.' This sentiment, Elizabeth Howe suggests, put into the mouth of a buffoon, is Shirley's way of 'mocking those who favour the idea of actresses and inviting his audience to join him'.[15]

Thus for a woman to 'play' her own 'part' means that she achieves her climax by herself, and in doing so annexes what is by right the male prerogative. A 'woman-actor' is a contradiction, a cross-gender enormity, for a woman does not *act*, she is *acted upon* and for her to 'act', either by taking the sexual initiative or by performing on the stage, is to transgress her assigned role in the scheme of things, hence the association with the prostitute who presumes to take charge of her own sexuality and dispose of it as she chooses.

The association of actresses and prostitution goes back as far as actresses can be traced. In ancient China they were officially classed as courtesans. In ancient Rome, until the *mima* Theodora married the Emperor Justinian c. AD 521, the *mimae* were forced to strip and perform naked at the Florialia, and could not renounce their profession, a fate passed on to their children. There was plenty of gossip in the sixteenth century to support Nashe's gibes at Continental actresses. Talleman des Reaux said of the early French companies: 'They were nearly all rascals and their women lived with great licentiousness', and 'were common property . . . amongst the members

of the company'. Lupercio reported to Philip of Spain in 1598 that the actress currently playing the Virgin in Madrid was living as the mistress of St Joseph, which apparently caused some mirth during the performance of the *Annunciation*. The Spanish seemed to have found it particularly difficult to adjust to the use of women onstage. A Jesuit writing in 1589, shortly after their first introduction, notes:

> The low women who ordinarily act are beautiful, lewd, and have bartered their virtue, and with gestures and movements of the whole body, and with voices bland and suave, with beautiful costumes, like sirens they charm and transform men into beasts to lure them the more easily to destruction as they themselves are the more wicked and lost to every sense of virtue.[16]

Women were found so disturbing that they were banned again in 1596 and replaced by boys, but reintroduced in 1600. Madox in the sole testimony to a woman on the Elizabethan stage describes her as a 'virgin' and a 'fye-marten', both cant terms for prostitute.[17] Did she perform because she was a prostitute or was she deemed so because she performed?

The repulsion as well as the fascination expressed in Elizabethan plays towards the loose woman's sexual aggressiveness (discussed in chapter 5) lies in her putting the man into the passive position. Meretrix in *Cambises*, 1561, demonstrates this when she offers herself for auction to the highest bidder:

> HUF: But hear'st thou, Meretrix? With who this night wilt thou lie?
> MERETRIX: With him that giveth the most money.
> RUF: . . . I will give thee sixpence to lie one night with thee.
> MERETRIX: Gog's heart, slave, dost thou think I am a sixpenny jug?
> No, 'wis, ye jack, I look a little more smug.
> SNUF: I will give her eighteen pence to serve me first.
> MERETRIX: Gramercy, Snuf, thou are not the worst. (lines 2445–55)

This sets the three soldiers into a quarrel over her, which she resolves by belabouring them with her staff. The others run away and eventually only Ruf is left: '*He falleth down; she falleth upon him, and beats him, and taketh away his weapon*.' She then completes his humiliation by making him go before her as her usher. Her pugnacity is of a piece with her promiscuity. Such behaviour is seen as unnatural, a reversal of roles; hence the recurring motif of the she-wolves and adulteresses who attempt to force men, always unsuccessfully in these plays, to have sex with them. It falls appropriately to Thomas Heywood to provide the definitive rebuke to the woman who takes the sexual initiative: 'men couet not / These proffered pleasures; but loue-sweets deny'd' – so Adonis replies to the forwardness of Venus in

The Brazen Age, part of Heywood's bourgeoisification of classical myth, when she attempts to reverse conventional roles:

VENUS: Why doth *Adonis* flye the Queene of loue? . . .
Come, let vs tumble on this violet banke:
Pre'thee be wanton; let vs toy and play,
Thy icy fingers warme betweene my breasts . . .
ADONIS: This loosenesse makes you foul in *Adons* eye . . . (II.ii)

Heywood, however, is not being entirely frank. 'Looseness' could on occasion be highly attractive. As Simone de Beauvoir says: 'Man does not devote himself wholly to the Good . . . he retains shameful lines of communication with the Bad'.[18] Despite the widespread determination to make Elizabethan plays improving experiences for the female spectators, the presentation of whores in these plays matches in frequency that of the Good Woman and provides a compensatory erotic interest for the inevitable tedium involved in the presentation of female purity.

Before leaving the 'woman's part', it has one further set of important associations. While in its first use by Posthumus quoted above it carried the sense of 'role', it is also perceived in his misogynist raving in the same passage, like Jung's concept of *anima*, as part of the male psyche, the feminine element in man, which presumably Posthumus would like to expunge:

Could I find out
The woman's part in me – for there's no motion
That tends to vice in man, but I affirm
It is the woman's part . . . (*Cymbeline*, II.v.19–22)

This may go some way towards explaining the extreme ambivalence with which the male performer treats, and the male spectator receives, the female role: part condemnation and part fascination; part self-display, perhaps, but also part self-exorcism?

Introduction: the significance of the performer

SHAKESPEARE AND THE CRITICS

At the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* Petruchio commands Katherine to tell the other wives what duty they owe their husbands. This prompts a forty-four line speech stressing the need for women to accept their husbands as lords and masters:

> Such a duty as the subject owes the prince,
> Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
> And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
> And not obedient to his honest will,
> What is she but a foul contending rebel,
> And graceless traitor to her loving lord? (v.ii. 155–60)

It ends with Kate offering to put her hand beneath her husband's foot. Few dramatic moments have received so much attention, or led to so many interpretations.

Most modern critics find the notion of Kate's submission unacceptable, especially by so obsequious a gesture, and tend to suggest instead some sense of playfulness in which Kate delivers the speech in an ironic tone. Some argue that Kate is being insincere in order to deceive Petruchio. Harold Goddard suggests it is a case of 'What Every Woman Knows', namely that a wife gains her supremacy in marriage by making the man think that he is in charge.[1] According to Coppélia Kahn, Kate protects her 'intellectual freedom' by 'deluding' her husband.[2] Other critics take the view that it is Shakespeare who does not mean it, either because he is satirising the patriarchy, Petruchio's taming being a mockery of male prejudice and wish-fulfilment,[3] or because the convention in which he wrote by its nature releases the author from meaning what he says. H. J. Oliver would have it that:

The lecture by Kate on the wife's duty to submit is the only fitting climax *to the farce* – and for that very reason it cannot logically be taken seriously, orthodox though the views expressed may be.[4]

He takes the view that Shakespeare was in the process of remoulding the wife-beating tradition to make it more sympathetic to women. Similarly, to John Bean the play constitutes 'the emergence of a humanised heroine against a background of depersonalized farce unassimilated from the play's fabliau sources'.[5]

The most popular view, however, amongst those critics who take an optimistic view of the play is that Petruchio does not believe in wifely submission either.[6] Margaret Ranald claims that:

Shakespeare has skilfully remoulded his material to portray an atypical Elizabethan attitude towards marriage through the development of a matrimonial relationship in which mutuality, trust, and love are guiding forces.[7]

It is a shared burlesque of inequality by two equals. Petruchio, having guided his new wife to an understanding of mutuality, is thus no longer a male chauvinist breaking her will, but a benevolent psychiatrist who has brought his wife to sanity using, says Ranald, 'subtlety, art, reason, and love'. According to Hugh Richmond:

[Kate's] beating of the bound Bianca (II.i.21) is obviously pathological; and even her wit has a strain of physical violence (II.i.220f.) which implies a mind close to breakdown. Thus . . . her disintegrating personality seems to justify almost any kind of shock therapy . . .[8]

Bean regards the process of Petruchio's taming as containing:

a consistent pattern of romantic elements . . . that show Kate's discovery of her inward self through her discovery first of play and then of love. . . . Thus Kate is tamed not by Petruchio's whip but by the discovery of her own imagination . . . the liberating power of laughter and play.

By the end, according to Richmond, 'Katharina . . . displays all the signs of recovered mental health', and the ultimate indication that Kate is fully 'cured' is that she is able to laugh at herself.

Why critics should want to reach these conclusions is all too obvious. They are determined to save the play from attacks such as those of the theatre critics Michael Billington, who argues that such a 'totally offensive' work 'should be put back firmly and squarely on the shelf', and Harold Hobson, who described the play as 'dull, brutal, ill-written, and indecent'.[9] Only by making the play and its author conform with modern views about gender relations will they preserve it for performance and enable its