

WHY DID THE ENGLISH STAGE TAKE BOYS FOR ACTRESSES?

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English professionals used skilled boys and youths to play female roles until the Restoration, many decades after their Continental counterparts began to use actresses. The nagging question is why. Did audiences prefer female impersonation by males or did the structure and economics of the theater business delay the advent of actresses?¹ Sophie Tomlinson offers another persuasive argument: English dramatists feared ‘the threat of the actress in performance [that] lay in the potential for presenting femininity as a vivid and mobile force: the spectacle of the woman-actor summoning up a spectre of the female subject’.² When Queen Henrietta Maria and her ladies took speaking roles in court drama, Caroline writers responded with plays that treat performing women with satiric hostility, striving at the same time to avoid open criticism of the queen.

Tomlinson’s analysis is acute but I want to argue that the English players had faced such a ‘threat’ before. In the 1570s, the challenge came from Italian actresses instead of a French queen. Actresses first joined itinerant commedia dell’arte troupes in Italy in the 1560s, and by the 1570s the first great divas and their troupes were crossing national borders and becoming royal favorites outside Italy, especially in France and Spain. Some mixed-gender troupes even visited remote England to play at Elizabeth’s court and for popular audiences. In the same period the English opened their doors to their first paying audiences. Faced with the constant demand for new plays, love stories and romances, writers pressed into service the materials and methods of the Italian players –

plots featuring blocking fathers and rebellious daughters; star scenes of poetic improvising, sung laments and madness; and playmaking via *contaminatio* of theatregrams – while derogating their rivals as vulgar clowns and whores only capable of farces and jigs.³

The Italification of English plays meant many more roles for women. Before 1578 half of all adult plays in the repertory had no female speaking parts at all. After that date not one play lacks a female role.⁴ Female leading parts grew longer, more exotic and more complex, with star scenes that called on players to show their acting skill. Many of these roles bear the marks of the diva, but instead of using women to play them the English imitated (and often satirized) the *immamorata* the foreign actress helped invent. The evidence lies in the

¹ Michael Shapiro, ‘The introduction of actresses in England: Delay or Defensiveness?’, in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Champaign, IL, 1999).

² Sophie Tomlinson, ‘She that plays the king: Henrietta Maria and the threat of the actress in Caroline culture’, in *The Politics of Tragicomedies: Shakespeare and After*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (London, 1992), 192.

³ Thomas Nashe sneered at the Italians for using ‘whores and common courtyzans to play women’s parts’, *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Diuell* (London, 1592), 90–1. Thomas Heywood dismissed their repertory: all plays ‘that frequent are / In Italy and France, even in these dayes, / Compar’d with ours, are rather jiggs than Playes’ (from the Prologue, *A Challenge for Beautie* (London, 1636)).

⁴ David Mann, ‘Appendix: Female characters in the adult repertory, 1500–1614’, *Shakespeare’s Women: Performance and Conception* (Cambridge, 2008), 241–5.

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plays of the most innovative playwrights, including John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare and John Webster. These writers managed to create marketable substitutes for the star actress using boys to simulate her hypertheatrical foreign glamour.

How has this debt remained invisible for so long? Despite the transnational turn in early modern studies, few Shakespeareans take any interest in any form of theatre but the London professional stage. Thus they fail to note that the Italian scripted and popular drama, which playwrights constantly plundered for plots and roles, was irrevocably altered by the advent of the *innamorata* actress in the professional troupes of the period. English travellers and writers noticed her, even if we do not. The advent of the actress in Italy occurred sometime in the mid-century, with the first record of a woman in a troupe list dating to 1564. The *commedia dell'arte* had been all-male since its inception twenty years earlier, as were the amateur groups that performed regular comedy and the occasional tragedy. The professional women players proved enormously popular. The comici quickly changed their offerings, adding plays that focused on the unmasked lovers and enlarging the *innamorata* role in particular. Some literary playwrights did the same, exploiting the dramatic potential of the newly articulate, appealing leading woman and devising ways to move her to center stage, away from the windows and doors which had been the domain of the passive *virgo* of earlier plays. Divas such as Vincenza Armani, Vittoria Piissimi, Barbara Flaminia and Isabella Andreini took aim at other genres besides comedy, distinguishing themselves in scenes of high pathos, both in pastorals, which often featured attempted suicide and tearful laments, or in tragic performances of madness, suicide and murder.

The impact of actresses on drama extended beyond Italy in the form of roles and plots featuring active, voluble young women whose deeds, choices and fates became increasingly important in all three Renaissance genres: comedy, pastoral and tragedy. Their multi-generic versatility made them sought-after stars and elevated the prestige of

their companies, enabling them to establish playing routes and patronage networks all over the map.⁵ Very rapidly, the *innamorata* role expanded in both improvised and scripted drama, carried across the Continent by the itinerant comici and by the foreign players and writers with whom they came in contact. Over time actresses proved an innovation that was nothing short of revolutionary. Their charisma and skills spurred groundbreaking experiments in pastoral tragicomedy and musical drama, prompting the composers of *intermedi* and the first operas to feature them in their works.⁶ The first actresses also carved out an important new identity for women as paid artisans, and established a space for women to speak and act in the public sphere.

The English first heard about this dazzling novelty from ambassadors to France, who wrote excitedly about the Italian troupes that had entertained the court in 1571 and 1572. Throughout the 1570s Queen Elizabeth showed a lively appetite for Italian plays and players, even commissioning her own Italian comedy. Individual Italian entertainers had crossed the Channel to play at court and in London since the days of Henry VIII but now full companies began to arrive. In 1574 one company presented an avant-garde pastoral with nymphs, goddesses and a satyr for the queen on her summer progress, and in 1577–8 actors and actresses in the troupe of Drusiano Martinelli came for months, performing comedies and acrobatic shows at court and in London, possibly at Burbage's new Theater.⁷ Reports about Italian companies abroad flowed in from travellers such as Fynes Moryson, George Whetstone, Philip Sidney, Thomas Coryate and George Sandys, and from touring

⁵ Pamela Allen Brown, 'The traveling diva and generic innovation', *Renaissance Drama* 44, 2 (2016), 249–67.

⁶ Emily Wilbourne, *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Chicago, 2016), pp. 51–91; Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 11–20, 149.

⁷ Robert Henke, 'Back to the future: A review of twentieth-century *commedia*-Shakespeare studies', *Early Theatre* 11 (2008), 227–40.

English players who brought home news about the comici and their craft. The English learned much and stole much from the Italians whose material and methods of playmaking helped them meet the incessant demand for new plays week after week, especially comedies and romances in the Italian style. Playwrights translated or adapted whole plays from Italy but more often they re-used familiar ‘theatregrams’ (roles, plot elements, speeches and scenes) they found in five-act humanist plays and in the *arte*’s improvised and scripted three-act plays drawing on them.⁸ This new kind of drama placed romantic lovers front and centre, and thus the *innamorata* part honed by the actresses grew in size and importance.

In England, actress-driven roles first appear in children’s plays at court. Lyly worked in the shadow of Tasso, whose career and poetry Elizabeth avidly followed. Tasso called on the famous Gelosi company and their actresses to play in early performances of *Aminta* (1573), a phenomenal success. The influential *Aminta* spurred new pastorals in courts across Europe, including the pastoral that the Italian players presented to Elizabeth in 1574. As Tasso’s choice suggests, the skilled divas proved far more compelling in pastorals than cross-dressed amateur youths and they quickly redefined its specialized erotic, poetic and musical vocabulary. Playing nymphs and goddesses in their sheer classicizing gowns, foreign actresses played up their attractions in Arcadian settings that allowed a far greater scope for female passion and action than Renaissance comedies set on the city street. (When the diva Isabella Andreini wrote her pastoral *Mirtilla* in the mode of Tasso, she featured a clever nymph who tricks, binds and beats a rapine satyr.)

Like the Italians, Lyly enlarged the scope for female mimesis by creating protean and passionate women: the hapless Queen Sapho, who runs mad with desire under Venus’s spell in Lyly’s *Sapho and Phao*, for example, and the charismatic Pandora of *The Woman in the Moon*, whose beauty makes the gods both envious and vengeful, but who quickly converts all to desperate lovers who vie for her favors. Lyly’s boyish women remain elegantly

androgynous, befitting their Italianate courtly audiences but, when playwrights faced the open arenas and vast audiences of the new popular stages, they created a bolder, more aggressive diva. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the first great hit of the public stage, Kyd creates a single-minded actress-avenger in Bel-Imperia, who schemes to gain her will, flirts poetically, soliloquizes often and finally destroys her prey with a stellar performance in the final play-within-the-play. Recruiting her for the role of Perseda, Hieronymo praises Italian tragedians for their extemporal playing and for their actresses: ‘For what’s a play without a woman in it?’ Taking the low road of exploitative satire, Anthony Munday vulgarized the *innamorata* role in *The Two Italian Gentlemen*, his adaptation of Luigi Pasqualigo’s *Il Fedele*. His Victoria is positively courtesan-like, more musical and more murderous than her Italian original.

Shakespeare’s adaptations were varied and complex: he drew on a varied repertoire of traits for his actress-types, including hyper-theatricality, literariness, expressive complexity and protean versatility. These show up within roles in his earliest comedies, from the cross-dressing Julia and idealized Silvia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the proud, Latin-speaking, improvising Bianca of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Not just textual sources but Italian performative models provided templates for the extemporal witplay and theatrical verve of Rosalind, Viola, Portia and Helena. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare’s first great tragedy, he offers spectators a stunningly original diva in Juliet, a theatrical prodigy whose magnetic persona blends

⁸ Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare’s Time* (New Haven, 1989). English playwrights imitated scenes and speeches of the newly central, passionate and complex actress-driven *innamorata*, which featured in both *commedia dell’arte* scenarios and in Torquato Tasso’s *Aminta*, Battista Guarini’s *Pastor Fido*, Girolamo Bargagli’s *La Pellegrina*, Grazzini’s *La Spiritata* (adapted by John Jeffere as *The Bugbears*), Luigi Pasqualigo’s *Il Fedele* (adapted by Anthony Munday as *Feidele and Fortunio*) and Piccolomini’s *Allessandro* (adapted by George Chapman as *May Day*), among others.

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aspects of the subaltern boy and the sublime *innamorata*, and whose art conceals art.

The diva type also had to be spectacular. With the proper wig, make-up, gown and props, the players might impress audiences with a dazzling vision of Cleopatra or Queen Elizabeth. Brilliant staging went only so far in simulating an *innamorata* in the style of the diva, however: the success of the sleight-of-hand depended on the talent and charisma of the boy who played her and the writer who provided his lines. The actress could project a confident elegance and pull off quick-witted improvisations because of her long professional training, backed up by her star power. The roster of boys talented and experienced enough to pull off a role such as Juliet was always limited, yet playwrights continued to create them in the vein of the celebrity diva. Though the boy actor had painfully acquired Latin literacy and training in memorization, vocal delivery, singing and musicianship, these skills were put to the test when he had to deliver the greatness of Cleopatra in her death scene or to play witty Rosalind playing Ganymede, with all her improvisatory flair. Ambitious actresses today covet such complex leading roles, which spur them to surpass their own limits as players. The young actor handed such past might feel actorly pride and ambition, but it is even more likely that he feared getting hissed and even beaten if he failed at producing the illusion of stardom (not just womanhood) on stage. The chances of finding a talented boy player up to the challenge was low and the risks of failure were high, for both actor and writer.

This brings us to the question Stephen Orgel posed long ago: 'Why did the English stage take boys for women?'⁹ Many Shakespeareans might answer that they were barred by law from using women or that there were simply no women players that the professionals could draw on. Both are false assertions. No law regulating the gender of actors has ever come to light but ample evidence does exist that women performed at court, in the streets, at great houses, in parish halls and, on rare occasions, the London professional stage.¹⁰ As I have shown, Italian troupes with actresses

crossed the Channel to play in London and at court, and we know that later on French actresses played in Caroline London. In other words, the all-male stage was surrounded by spheres of public and private performance that included girls and women in significant numbers, playing for audiences high and low. Some played speaking roles and many were trained in singing and music. These performing women, and this rich history, have never been judged noteworthy because English culture and history 'had an interest in rendering them unnoticeable'.¹¹

Thanks to the efforts of feminist scholars and the increasing interest in the transnationality of early modern theatrical culture, the phenomenon of women performing has become harder to ignore. Interpreting this evidence has attracted debate and controversy. Dympna Callaghan argues that, even if many women did perform in places other than the professional stage, it does not alter the fact that Shakespeare's theatre deliberately excluded women, creating a felt absence that affected every moment, every role, every play.¹² The men who controlled this womanless stage were deeply homosocial, like English culture at large, far more comfortable with the same-sex male love and affection than with female sexuality or men's desires for women; it follows that all female dramatic roles on that stage are products of masculinist projection and ventriloquism, blocking out female desire and

⁹ Stephen Orgel, 'Nobody's perfect: Or why did the English stage take boys for women?' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989), 7–29.

¹⁰ 'Introduction', Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, eds., *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage* (Aldershot, 2005); Jessica Schiermeister, 'The false issue of "illegality" of female performance', *The Shakespeare Standard*, <http://theshakespearestandard.com/false-issue-illegality-female-performance/>.

¹¹ Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 9.

¹² Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London, 2000). In a similar vein, David Mann refutes the idea that women spectators affected characterizations of women, which he calls largely masculinist projections, in *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception* (Cambridge, 2008).

subjectivity. Other scholars take the view that female pleasure, desire and fantasy were important factors in theatrical success, forces that pushed dramatists to offer plays and characters that pleased not only men but women and offered new textures and contradictions in female impersonation.¹³ What is certain is that wooden depictions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women and satiric caricatures played by boy-puppets in drag appealed to some audiences for a limited period, but these female roles have largely vanished from memory.

A handful of brilliant diva-style roles by Shakespeare and his contemporaries continue to attract great actors and to move audiences of all kinds, quite a feat considering they were written four centuries ago and ‘created’ (in theatrical parlance) by boy players whose talents are generally underestimated and whose profession was equated with whoring and idleness. Part of the audience’s pleasure then and now was seeing a charismatic female character burn up the stage, just as they love seeing the theatrical showmen Hamlet, Falstaff and Richard III do the same. With hyper-theatrical roles tailored for star performances, the player’s actual gender is not as important as a great performance and, as Shakespeare teaches us, a diva such as Cleopatra or Viola can be played by a male or female. That is one of the distinctive qualities of a diva role: it summons not an ordinary woman and everyday gender identity but a professional player possessed of verbal eloquence and wit, volatile passions, histrionic self-awareness and love of centre stage.

Many scholars have written on the erotic appeal and sexual identity of the boy player of female roles. While this work is important, I believe the field should focus less on the boy’s homo- and hetero-erotic appeal and more on his skills and professional standing, since these are highly relevant to the meaning of his performed role and the plays in which he appears.¹⁴ At the same time, we need to demolish the premise that the English stage practices were totally isolated from Continental developments. Too often the English theatre business is cordoned off as an insider world dominated by male writers, segregated from cosmopolitan

aspirations and transnational theatrical and courtly networks which prominently featured performing women. The approach I advocate avoids the Scylla of essentialism that results from reducing players to the presumed erotic appeal stemming from their gender; and it steers clear of the Charybdis of treating Shakespeare as an exclusively English genius who did not need or learn anything from the Italians – an opinion expressed more often than you would think. What is missing is a more cosmopolitan view of the Shakespearean stage, which traded in exotic wares and competed for the favor of a knowing and demanding courtly clientele. Shakespeare’s theater shows a fascinated, edgy awareness of actresses that tempered and moulded his female roles. He and his peers knew that glamorous actresses playing women in love might well have an edge over boys who impersonated them. Their response was to adapt and imitate the diva’s trademark role, and in many cases the stragem worked.

Seeing the skilled and attractive boy-*innamorata* as a stand-in for the virtuosic actress allows us to make some headway with Orgel’s unanswered question. The English stage took boys for actresses because they wanted everything the actress offered, except the player herself. They took and used what the new actresses and their co-players offered freely: engaging, exciting young women in love, riveting passions, woman-centered plots and compelling star scenes that pleased both Italophilic courtly audiences and the crowds in the new arena theaters. Despite growing curiosity about

¹³ On the debate see Natasha Korda, ‘Women in the theatre’, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre* (Oxford, 2011) and Orgel, *Impersonations*, 11. Also see Clare McManus and Lucy Munro, ‘Renaissance women’s performance and the dramatic canon: Theatre history, evidence, and narratives’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33 (2015), 1–7.

¹⁴ Important studies focused on the training and ‘enskilment’ of the boy actor include Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare’s Theatre* (Basingstoke, 2011) and Scott McMillin, ‘The sharer and his boy: Rehearsing Shakespeare’s women’, in *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (Basingstoke, 2004), 195–230.

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the Italians and their actresses among elites and tours of Italian players in London, the English players managed to stem the tide, making England an anomaly by 1600. These professionals were fully aware of the mixed-gender stage but, without coordinating their efforts, they delayed the advent of professional actresses by decades, by inventing spectacular Italianate women and pressing talented boys to play them. With renewed attention being paid to character and the rising interest in performing women and girls in England and abroad, it is time to return to the study of women's roles but with more cosmopolitan eyes and a keener attention to gender-as-

performance. While no foreign diva invented Bel-Imperia, Juliet, Portia or the Duchess of Malfi, the diva's generic versatility, artistry and charisma shadow these and other stellar *innamorata* roles. When we open out the study of female mimesis to the transnational sphere, we see that women *did* participate in the making of theatre and in the creation of new roles, a phenomenon that put pressure on writers to create a new brand of woman-centered drama, even on the all-male stage. The irony is that the skilled labours of the lowly boy player and the foreign diva figure so large in that now forgotten history.