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Performing Femininity: Boy Actors and the Gendered Stage Before and After the Restoration

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Abstract

Actresses started performing in the theater around the 1660s. Earlier, the main concern of a playwright was to establish the gender of characters and actors. After Restoration, gender and sexuality became a concern for both the playwright and the audience, and sexual comedy also became popular. But what happened to adolescent boys who were performing female roles earlier, after the inclusion of women? This research aims to answer the above question and bring out the example of how the playwright established the gender of young boys and of the female role they played.

BOY ACTORS AND ACTRESSES

Women entered into the theatre as actresses around the 1660s. Before that, female roles were performed by adolescent boys. Apart from this change, the Restoration Period also saw a change in the concerns of the playwrights and audiences. Earlier, the major concern of theirs was to establish the gender of the performers, and the audience was well aware of the fact that young boys were playing the role of female characters. Later, ‘gender and sexuality’ became a major thing which led to the sexualization of actresses. But that does not mean that the boy actors were not facing any abuse. How was the gender of the character established before the 1660s? What did the young boys do when actresses started performing female roles?

It is important to see what plays came out in the 17th Century. *Macbeth* (1606) by William Shakespeare, *Epicæne* or *The Silent Women* (1609) by Ben Jonson, *The Country Wife* (1675) by William Wycherley and *The Rover* (1677) by Aphra Behn are some of the major plays of the seventeenth century.

In *Macbeth*, the lines written by the playwright established the fact that the adolescent boy who was performing the role of Lady Macbeth was a female. The essential problem that these characters struggled with throughout the play—how to be a husband/wife, king/queen, man/woman—is to transcend the stage or page and haunt the audience. It is evident from the words and sentences allotted to the character of Lady Macbeth and to other characters who are speaking about her. For example, some of Lady Macbeth’s dialogues are: ‘unsex me here’, ‘come to my woman’s breast’, ‘take my milk for gall’, ‘are you a man’, and ‘it would become a woman’s story’. These phrases suggest the sex of the character. The examples from other characters’ dialogue include ‘I would not have such a heart in my bosom’ by Gentlelady and

“natural ruby of your cheeks” by Macbeth. It is interesting because it establishes the sex of the character, but it also suggests the sex of the performer. ‘My woman’s breast’, ‘my milk’ and ‘my bosom’; too much stress on words like these suggests the opposite of it.

However, it hardly mattered because their audience was well aware of this fact that actresses were not allowed in the Elizabethan theatre. “Gender is performative in Macbeth—meaning that audiences perceive gender only as it is performed, the gender is dependent upon performance as the text is being performed” (Reaves, 12). It was much later, around the 1660s, that women were allowed to perform. *Epicoene or The Silent Women* by Ben Jonson is worth mentioning here. Although it was first performed in 1609, it became popular during the Restoration Period. Samuel Pepys mentioned in his diary that this play was amongst the first which was legally performed after the accession of Charles II. The plot of this play is even more interesting.

It is about *Epicoene*, a boy disguised as a woman. At the end, he takes off his wig to reveal his identity. This role was played by Kinaston first. “Among other things here, Kinaston, the boy hath the good turn to appear in three shapes: first, as a poor woman in ordinary clothes to please Morose; then in fine clothes as a gallant, and in them was clearly the prettiest woman” (Haggerty, 314). Plots like these bring out how cross-dressing was prevalent and ‘gender and sexuality’ was becoming a common theme. Cross-dressing was one of the major things used by adolescent boys as theater was only one aspect of a culture in which gender was dependent on clothing. “What allows boys to be substituted for women in the theatre is not anything about the genital nature of boys and women, but precisely the costume, and more particularly, cultural assumptions about costume” (Steen, 43). This play of Ben Jonson is interesting because first the playwright establishes him as a woman (through dress and dialogue) and then reveals his true sex. The first time, the role of *Epicoene* was played by Kinaston. Around the 1660s, women entered theatre. This role was played by actresses in later productions. “What happened to Kinaston and other adolescent boys like him?” is a question which excites curiosity in everyone who gets to know that women found their way into the theatre around the 1660s

It is quite easy to trace the history of Kynaston because he did not disappear from the life of theatre after the entry of women/actresses. In the Restoration, when women's roles were increasingly given to women, those "boys," like Kynaston, who played women's roles all (or mostly) seemed to try to make their way into men's roles. Among the early male roles that Kynaston played after women were admitted as actresses – he played Roselli and/or Caraffa in John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1660-61 season); Otto in Fletcher's *Rollo, Duke of Normandy* in *The Bloody Brother* (1660-61); Guymor in John Dryden's *The Indian Emperor*; or, *The Conquest of Mexico* by the Spaniards (1664-65) – was the role of Peregrine in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1664-65).

Did all boys who played women go on to play men? Some of them did, certainly. Kynaston is the best example of them, but what about the rest who could not get or perform the roles of men? As the system was structured, their apprenticeships legally entitled them to practice not just as actors but as grocers, goldsmiths, bricklayers, etc., and in London to practice any trade or craft that they chose. So, they were members of some occupational guilds, as Ben Jonson was a bricklayer. Thus, boy actors technically might be apprentice grocers, eligible to enter the grocers' guild when their apprenticeships were complete. The theatre worked on a guild model and occupational guilds barred women except widows. K. D. M. Snell, an economic historian pointed out, in '*Annals of the Labouring Poor*', that in the seventeenth century women started participating in the guilds as "fully independent, legally responsible craftspeople" (73). Though it can be used to say that the theatre worked on the guild model, that is why women were barred. But that is not the case because the main reason was the restoration of Charles II, who was impressed by the French actresses.

The coming of actresses does not mean that there was a shift in the patriarchal setup. Orgel argues that boys and women were culturally analogous, "antithetical not to each other, but to men" (103). Both boys and women were acknowledged objects of adult men's desire and filled similar roles within the patriarchy. Both women and boy actors, who were apprentices, were subordinates in a hierarchy. Looking at the boy actors of the Renaissance and the actresses of the Restoration, they seemingly do have a lot in common. "Both groups were justified by some on

moral grounds: boy actors protected women from the immorality of public playhouses, while in the Restoration women made the stage moral by —seemingly observing the Deuteronomic prohibition of transvestism and preventing homoeroticism” (Leigh,9). At the same time, both groups were chastised by others as immoral. Both could be looked at as whores or sexually indecent. Boy actors and actresses were both considered second-class citizens and subject to prejudice and abuse (though, as Shapiro states, it was temporary for the boys). One marked difference is that, unlike the boy players (at least at first), the actresses were initially treated as a novelty.

Sodomy (or buggery as it was called at the time) first became a civil offense, punishable by death, in 1533 when Henry VIII issued a formal decree on the subject, The Statute of 1533. Except for a short period in the 1500s, sodomy remained a capital offense in England until 1828. These laws on sodomy suggest the presence of homosexual acts (it can not be said with certainty that these were forced on boy actors. Homosexual practices, technically illegal but seldom prosecuted, did not threaten a man’s identity the way heterosexual passion did (Orgel); hence—in an erotically charged theater—boy actors were preferred to actresses. Sodomy, for example, appears to have been tolerated to a certain extent by the culture at large, judging from frequent allusions in plays to male-male sexual acts, as well as from the infrequent prosecution of sodomy (defined legally in the period as homosexual rape).

The Country Wife is a play which came after the Restoration. It is about Harry Horner, a notorious womanizer, who spreads a rumor that he has contracted venereal disease and that, while being treated for this by a French surgeon, he has accidentally been made impotent. Although it is a satire on society, it also brings out the fact that ‘gender and sexuality’ became a major concern for playwrights and audiences. Earlier, it was to establish the gender of boy actors, but later the sexuality of the character became important. Apart from the hypersexual activeness of men, plays of this period also saw the sexualization of actresses, on and off-stage. Off-stage, they were prone to abuse and on stage, they were sexualized through costumes, dialogues and gestures. This period also brought sexual comedy into its plays.

The period of Restoration, indeed, brought a shift in terms of performers (from adolescent boys to actresses) but also in terms of how their roles were written, and they performed their roles (a play aimed at establishing genders and later sexuality, gender and sexualization became a theme and concern of plays). The coming of actresses also meant the removal of adolescent boys who were performing female roles. They were part of the occupational guilds and continued working there, some of them got the male roles and continued their career in theatre.

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