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Shakespeare and Female Playgoers in Renaissance England

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ABSTRACT

Female playgoers in the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline eras watched Shakespeare's performances. The paucity of resources about female playgoers in Renaissance England makes it difficult to obtain a sufficient picture of their culture. To overcome this problem, I take two approaches that will be helpful. One is to develop an understanding of female theatre audiences by analyzing contemporary references to them in general; the other is to examine Shakespeare's works and contemporary references to him. In this chapter, I first examine primary materials related to female playgoers, especially prologues and epilogues of English Renaissance plays, to elucidate the cultural and social backgrounds of female playgoers and their responses to theatre. The second section investigates the creator-audience relationship between Shakespeare (with his playing company) and female playgoers by looking at paratexts of his plays and records of court performances.

1. Introduction

The presence of active and influential female playgoers at playhouses in Renaissance England. playgoers as 'active' when they are interested in the contents of the performances, try to attend theatrical performances willingly and frequently and have detailed knowledge about the theatre – in short, active playgoers are ones who find pleasure or jouissance in theatre. Such individuals are more likely to be involved in the process of canonization than those who occasionally visit playhouses, for the former are able to compare different plays and evaluate them according to their own standard. The term 'influential' connotes the political aspect of the canonization. Using their social, economic or intellectual resources, influential playgoers can make an impact on creators or sway other playgoers' opinions. Active playgoers who have no insufficient resources to express their responses to theatre would have difficulty exerting an influence on theatrical trends. Playgoers with wealth or social status, but without interest in the content of plays, could not greatly contribute to establish critical criteria; for example, it is possible that aristocratic people are willing to receive dedications from artists or to attend playhouses as part of their social life, yet they do not necessarily take much interest in evaluating dramatic works. Although looking at the play going patterns of non-privileged women is essential when it comes to establishing critical criteria for theatre as popular culture, I will devote more attention to women of higher social ranks because such playgoers tend to be more influential and to leave more records.

2. Women and Theatre in Renaissance England

Female playgoers in early modern England. Various studies have dealt with play going in this period and offered considerable knowledge of female playgoers. Although there are debates surrounding the details of play going culture, and it is difficult to draw a complete picture, most studies agree that a substantial number of women attended playhouses during that period. Before the 1940s, women's play going in early modern London had not been a major focus of interest for scholars. Female playgoers were only sparsely mentioned: E. K. Chambers' The Elizabethan Stage (1923) supposed that most female playgoers in Elizabethan playhouses were 'light women' or ladies, based on a record about a Venetian ambassador's play going to pursue a woman (ii. p. 549). However, Alfred Harbage's Shakespeare's Audience (1941), the first substantial research on audiences in Renaissance London, examined what kind of people attended playhouses using a wide variety of materials, ranging from diaries to anti-theatrical treatises, and found plenty of evidence about the play going of common people and women. He censured scholars who underrated the number of female playgoers in 'imposing their own sense of decorum upon the Elizabethans' (p. 77). Based on the records about the capacity of playhouses and the size of their average audience, he also argued that Shakespeare's plays were very popular in his time (p. 51). After Harbage's study, audience studies did not attract scholars' attention until the end of the 1970s. The exact reasons for this are unknown, but I point out three possibilities. First, after Harbage finished his work, World War II made it temporarily difficult for scholars to obtain the primary materials necessary for audience studies due to financial and transportational problems. Second, audience studies, which focus on the social environment surrounding theatre, went out of fashion in the vogue of New Criticism after World War II, for New Criticism tended to separate a text from its social background. Third, the studies of social and economic history made considerable progress in the late 1970s; scholars who have engaged in audience studies after the 1970s are greatly influenced by social historians, such as Lawrence Stone.1 It was not until Ann Jennalie Cook published The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576–1642 (1981) that audience studies gained ground. Cook assumed that playhouses in early modern London mainly provided entertainment for the socially privileged, although she admitted that 'as frankly commercial enterprises, the theaters opened

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their doors to anyone with the price of admission' (p. 216). She focused on privileged women with money and prostitutes seeking business as comprising the majority of the female audience; her analysis of female playgoers differed from Harbage's and led to a similar conclusion to that of Chambers, though class and economic factors were more fully discussed than in his book (Cook, pp. 109 and 202–204). Although the significance of privileged playgoers proposed in her work is widely acknowledged, some scholars are critical of her analysis. For example, Martin Butler argues that it was impossible for theatre companies to gain profits from large playhouses by targeting only such playgoers, because the population of gentry in London was smaller than her estimation (Butler, pp. 293–306). As mentioned in my introduction, Andrew Gurr'sPlay going in Shakespeare's London, one of the definitive studies in this field, identified about 250 people who visited playhouses in London from 1557 and 1642, and showed that about thirteen percent of them were women of different classes (pp. 58–94). He also examined 474 references to playgoers and found evidence of the presence of female playgoers. He concluded that 'women from every section of society went to plays, from Queen Henrietta Maria to the most harlotry of vagrants' throughout the entire period (p. 67). Among the thirty-two identified female playgoers, Gurr regarded twenty-one women as 'ladies', or privileged female playgoers with social status and wealth (p. 71). On the other hand, he found various references to unidentified female commoners, such as citizens' wives, fish women and apple women. Judging from the expenditure per customer, women of higher ranks were more 'visible' customers than women of lower ranks.2 While these studies focus primarily on London, women's participation in theatrical performances outside London has gradually come to light, thanks to the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project. Evidence of participation in performances of every class of woman has been found in many parts of England.3 For example, Ann Thompson finds that in Hereford, an unmarried, untitled wealthy woman, Joyce Jeffreys, hired many entertainers between 1638 and 1648, during the theatre closure in London ('Women/"women" and the Stage', p. 110). After analyzing a variety of records about female performers and audience members appearing in REED, Fiona Ritchie concludes that women in and outside of London both attended theatrical performances in large numbers in various ways ('The Merciful Construction', p. 50). However, although these records demonstrate women's involvement in drama outside London, most of them participated in non-commercial theatre, such as pageants and guild plays. It is difficult to discuss their engagement in the canonization of the commercial drama.

3. Women's Interest In Theatre

female play going as a pleasure-seeking activity in Renaissance London. It mainly utilizes primary materials, such as privileged women's memoirs, to collect information related to individual women's pleasure in play going. I also utilize records written by male contemporaries and containing references to female playgoers, although their depictions of women in theatre, especially those in anti-theatrical works, do not always reflect the reality of female audiences. Many of the privileged female playgoers began attending plays in their girlhood, which suggests that the early exposure to theatre helped them to develop their own taste in theatre and influenced their ways of thinking. For example, Hatfield House documents reveal that the Cecils, including Ann and her sister Elizabeth, were 'enthusiastic playgoers from childhood', and Ann Cecil was fifteen when she visited the Globe by boat in 1627 (Peck, 'The Caroline Audience', p. 477). Play going as a girlhood experience was closely linked to female friendship in records written by women. Lady Ann Halkett's memoir, written around 1677 and 1678, shows that she visited playhouses with a female group 'together without any man', although a male escort was usually expected for a woman of higher ranks at playhouses, because she 'loved well to see plays' but wanted to avoid becoming a subject of rumor by men about 'how much it had cost them'. 4 She and her female companions could enjoy the temporary escape from male surveillance at playhouses. Since Halkett's memoir is largely based on her play going experience before the London Theatre closure in 1642, when she was nineteen, her play going group was perhaps mainly composed of her young female acquaintances. 4 Halkett, The Memoir of Anne, Lady Halkett in John Loftis' The Memoir Lady Mary Rich (née Boyle), Countess of Warwick, also visited playhouses under the influence of her sister-in-law Elizabeth Boyle, sister of playwright Thomas Killigrew and wife of Francis Boyle, Mary's brother. While Francis was absent, the Boyle sisters 'grew so great a kindness' between them, and Elizabeth enticed Mary 'to spend (as she did) her time in seeing and reading plays and romances' by using 'a great and ruling power' over Mary (Mary Rich, Autobiography of Mary Countess of Warwick, p. 4). Mary was about fifteen years old when her brother and seventeen-year-old Elizabeth got married in 1639. After she grew older, Mary abandoned play going, became interested in religion, and thought that she had been 'vain' in her adolescence (Rich, p. 21). What is significant about these records is that some of the young female playgoers bonded through sharing the pleasurable experience at playhouses. These hitherto unrecognized small female play going groups would develop into wider and more influential female interpretive communities.

Among women's supportive activities regarding theatre, their enthusiasm for boy actors was noted by their contemporaries. Boy actors were essential components of the all-male stage in early modern England. Even Mary Sidney Worth's criticism of the artificial and highly stylized acting of boys specializing in female roles in The Countess of Montgomery's Urania provides evidence for the boy actors' influence on early modern playgoers' imaginations. Wroth twice likened women who behaved in an ostentatious manner to boy actors playing female roles. In The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania, a man pursued by a woman 'was no further wrought, then if he had seen a delicate play-boy acted a loving woman's part, and knowing him a Boy, liked only his action'.5 As Helen Hackett argues, Wroth described boy actors as 'aesthetically pleasing, but … emotionally unconvincing' (A Short History of English Renaissance Drama, p. 167). Apparently separating theatre and everyday life, Wroth thought that female characters played by boy actors were only plausible in theatre, a place governed by the power of illusion. The Second Part of the Countess Montgomery's Urania also depicts a female character's 'over-acting fashion' as 'more like a play-boy dressed gawdely up to shew a fond, loving, woman's part then a great Lady' (2.1.160).

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The comparison between boy actors and ostentatious women hints at Wroth's complex idea of gender performance, a notion that excessive femininity was something to be learned and performed, regardless of the learner's gender, and that an excessively 'feminine' woman could look like a boy in drag. Although Wroth did not appreciate the lack of reality in boy actors' performances, these comments in Urania illustrate that boy actors inspired female playgoers' interest. While Mary Sidney Wroth's often-quoted comments show her negative attitude toward boy actors, several records demonstrate how much power boy actors specialising in female roles had over women, mostly unidentified female playgoers. Until the end of the 1600s, boy companies mainly performed at court and private playhouses such as Black friars (Shapiro, 'Boy Companies and Private Theaters', pp. 321–22). The price of admission to Black friars and other indoor playhouses, which mainly targeted wealthy playgoers, was higher than those of open-air playhouses such as the Globe.6 Black friars and the boy actors were supported by court ladies and received relatively generous patronage from Elizabeth I, despite her usually parsimonious policy.7 In 1605, active female playgoers attending the performances of boy actors were alluded to with a slightly derisive tone as the 'sisterhood of Black friars' by male playgoer Dudley Carleton.8 Restoration playwrights could easily remember these ladies' love of boy actors. In 1677, when actresses could play female roles on stage with Charles I's permission, Nathaniel Lee's The Rival Queens retrospectively and playfully stated that female playgoers would prefer boy actors in female clothes to real-life suitors:

For we have vowed to find a sort of toys Known to black friars, a tribe of chopping boys. If once they come, they'll quickly spoil your sport; There's not one lady will receive your court, But for the Youth in petticoats run wild, With, "O, the archest wag, the sweetest child." The panting breasts, white hands and little feet No more shall your palled thoughts with pleasure meet.9

4. Theatre's Response to Female Playgoers

Playwrights and playing companies had to think about active female playgoers because they were prospective customers of commercial playhouses. However, due to the scarcity of pertinent records, it is difficult to determine how they treated female playgoers. To find clues to the theatre's response to women, I use the prologues and epilogues of English Renaissance plays. In these texts, playwrights and playing companies address their audience directly, and sometimes express their thoughts on the target audience. Mostly written by men, prologues and epilogues might not reflect the reality of female playgoers of different social backgrounds, but at least they tell us what kind of reaction the creators expected from the audience in Renaissance England. A comprehensive survey of the prologues and epilogues of English Renaissance plays (1558–1642) has not yet been conducted in terms of gender, as David Roberts and Fiona Ritchie did in the field of Restoration plays.17 Richard Levin made a substantial contribution to audience studies by analysing several Jacobean, Caroline and early Restoration prologues and epilogues from the viewpoint of gender, and used his findings to supplement Gurr's conclusion that many women attended playhouses. Nevertheless, he admits that his research was based 'on incomplete data'; he did not check all the English Renaissance plays, and rarely mentions Elizabethan prologues or epilogues (p. 167). In his ground-breaking textual research on the prologues and epilogues of English Renaissance drama, Brian W. Schneider devotes one chapter to gender and points out the gradual increase of women's presence in theatre (pp. 93–114). However, unlike Roberts and Ritchie, Schneider does not conduct statistical analysis, and like Levin, he does not discuss early Elizabethan paratexts in detail. Furthermore, he focuses on gendered metaphors in paratexts rather than actual addresses toward female spectators.18 My concern in this chapter is playwrights' and players' techniques when it comes to pleasing female audiences, as well as women audience's responses to these techniques. Before analysing prologues and epilogues, it is necessary to explain my survey method. I reviewed all of the English Renaissance plays registered in the database English Drama in Literature Online, based on the New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature. This comprised 596 plays first printed between 1558 and 1642, from the accession of Elizabeth I to the London theatre closure (167 Elizabethan plays, 221 Jacobean plays and 208 Caroline plays as of February 2011). The plays performed during the period but unpublished before 1642, manuscript plays, non-English plays and plays published outside of England, prologues and epilogues published or survived separately from the playtexts were excluded.19 When plays involved textual problems concerning the paratexts, I followed Schneider's list of English Renaissance plays with prologues and epilogues, although I found some plays with paratexts which Schneider does not include.20

5. Female Playgoers in Shakespeare's Plays

Very few women's names are given in the records of the performances of Shakespeare's plays. Only one female playgoer is identified in the public performances: the wife of Antoine Le Fevre, a French ambassador, saw Pericles with her husband and others around April of 1607 at the Globe (Chambers, William Shakespeare, ii, p. 335) However, Shakespeare's plays and especially the prologues and epilogues to his plays are useful in investigating what reactions Shakespeare and his company expected from women. Only in prologues and epilogues do the playwright and his fellow players express their expectations regarding the audience or opinions about theatre. They do so not as fictional characters, but as professional performers – although such paratexts portray an ideal audience rather than the actual playgoers. I do not regard prologues and epilogues to Shakespeare's plays as expressions of his personal opinions; as Tiffany Stern argues, it is difficult to judge the authorship of prologues and epilogues because they were sometimes prepared by other playwrights, who did not write the playtext itself (Documents, pp. 112–117). Nevertheless, it is worth looking at 'what may be a Shakespeare prologue' or epilogue (Stern, Documents, p. 102), and the prologues and epilogues published with Shakespeare's plays were at least approved and performed by his company; they are helpful in understanding the marketing policy adopted by Shakespeare and his fellow players. By combining the results of the survey of prologues and epilogues with the analysis of the portrayals of female playgoers in Shakespeare's plays, I discuss how Shakespeare and his company viewed female playgoers.

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6. Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's status as an English canonical dramatist was established: after the Shakespeare Jubilee, his works and his persona were regarded an essential and inevitable part of social life for English society, and his name also became widely known outside of it. The historical developments of two types of media – theatrical entertainments and print publications – played essential and convergent roles in this climax of bardolatry, and women were deeply involved in the propagation of Shakespeare through these two media. Female reading communities recognised Shakespeare as their favourite dramatist, and some intellectually active female readers began conducting scholarly research and writing criticisms on Shakespeare. Female playgoers, such as the members of the Shakespeare Ladies Club, also promoted Shakespeare in theatre. David Garrick, understanding these women's influence, recognised them as powerful agents in the canonisation of Shakespeare, and women had their own presence at the Shakespeare Jubilee.

References

1. Margaret Cavendish, Sociable Letters, Letter 123. Quotations from her letters refer to Fitzmaurice's edition of 2004.
2. AphraBehn, Preface to The Dutch Lover, in The Works of AphraBehn, edited by Janet Todd, v, p. 162. Quotations from Behn refer to this edition.
3. Judith Drake, An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex, p. 42. This book was first published in 1696. Quotations from Judith Drake refer to The Pioneers: Early Feminists, an anthology edited by Marie Mulvey Roberts and Mizuta Tamae. It includes the facsimile version of the fourth edition of 1721.
4. Ritchie, '"The Merciful Construction of Good Women": Women's Responses to Shakespeare in the Theatre in the Long Eighteenth Century' (hereafter 'The Merciful Construction'). See also Ritchie's shorter articles, 'The Influence of the Female Audience on the Shakespeare Revival of 1736 –1738: The Case of the Shakespeare Ladies Club' (hereafter 'The Shakespeare Ladies Club') and 'Women and Shakespeare in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century' (hereafter 'Women and Shakespeare').
5. Dobson, Making, pp. 134–84. Many researchers have commented on the reception and canonisation of Shakespeare. For example, Taylor's Reinventing Shakespeare deals with the reception of Shakespeare from the Restoration to the 1980s. Furthermore, Hume focuses on the reception of Shakespeare in the early eighteenth century in 'Before the Bard: "Shakespeare" in Early Eighteenth-Century London'. Dugas analyses how Shakespeare came to be commercially consumed through stage performances and publication in his Marketing the Bard: Shakespeare in Performance and Print 1660–1740.
6. McManus, 'What Ish My Nation?', p. 188. See also Bate's The Genius of Shakespeare, pp. 157–216. For nationalism and women in Britain, I am greatly indebted to Linda Colley. For the relationship between the canonisation and nationalism in general, see Helgerson, pp. 193–246; and Shrank, pp. 14–15. For the canons in modern states in general, see also Jusdanis, p. 49.
7. For the course of the canon debate, see Górak, pp. 1–8. For the course of the debate on Shakespeare's authority, see also Bristol, pp. 3–29.
8. See Alter's Introduction to Frank Kermode's Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon, p. 11.
9. See von Hallberg, Introduction to Canons, p. 1
10. See Guillory's 'It Must Be Abstract', a short discussion with Frank Kermode in Pleasure and Change, pp. 65–75. See also Gullory's Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, p. 10.
11. The Pleasure of the Text, translated by Richard Miller, p. 14. I refer to plaisir as 'pleasure' but keep the French word jouissance for three reasons: first, Miller's English translation 'bliss' is too spiritual to express the sexual connotation of the original word; second, I maintain the phonetic and etymological association with the English word 'joy'; third, 'jouissance' was used as a loan word in English until the sixteenth century, and now many English-speaking scholars in French studies use 'jouissance'. See 'jouisance | jouiisance' in Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED).
12. Kermode, pp. 21–22. See also Heath's Introduction to Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text.
13. For the emphasis on dismay and the pleasure of laughter, Alter points out that the works of Jane Austen and Alexander Pope show 'no dissolution of the self nor an existential abyss but a delighting play of perception, an invitation to ponder motives and make subtle discriminations about behaviour, character, and moral predicaments' (p. 9). On comical works, Flieger also argues that '[j]oking pleasure' is different from Barthes' jouissance (p. 122).
14. Straznicky, Introduction to The Book of the Play, p. 1. Peters' Theatre of the Book 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe and Stern's Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page also discuss the relationship between performances and playbooks.
15. In Appendices 1 – 5, I present the results of my research on playbooks.
16. See Oppenheimer and Frank, p. 1192; and Diemand-Yauman, Oppenheimer, and Vaughan, p. 114. For the physicality of the book and its influence on interpretation, see also Genette's discussion in his pioneering work Paratexts and Earle's analysis of paperbacks (p. 158).
17. Chartier; and Woolf, Reading History in Early Modern England, pp. 80–81.
18. Foster, p. 3. See also Cartwright, p. 25; and Taylor, To Analyze Delight: A Hedonist Criticism of Shakespeare, p. 117.
19. On theatrical propaganda and nationalism, see also Shaffer, p. 18.
20. See also Peacy's discussion, pp. 2–5.