

‘What was the role of women in Elizabethan theatres? Why were female roles played by men during this era and how did they portray women?’

‘Invisible but influential’¹ is the words used by Professor Emma Smith to describe the role of women in theatres during the Elizabethan era. The practice of men presenting themselves as women in public areas can be found as early as the Ancient Greek theatres, roughly around 2,500 years ago, and is also found in multiple other theatrical customs worldwide. The basis for the evolution of these customs, which continued to persist for millenniums in different measures, is linked to how ideas regarding gender were comprehended, especially a women’s place in public. Women from ancient Greece, similar to Elizabethan women, could not vote, nor could they possess land or assets, and were raised to stay at home and rear offspring.²

Several of these ideas established the fundamentals of gender norms in England during the 1600s. During this time, English concepts of gender, female rights, and society’s presumption of femininity in womanhood all played a crucial part in how plays were executed on stage, the narratives performed, and who performed them. In addition to legal constraints regarding women’s rights, there was substantial pressure from society to adhere to specified social norms. Women were counted on to be submissive, silent, and confined to the house, with their first priority restricted to marriage, confinement and childrearing. Although their position in society and financial status was significant to what extent these expectations were embodied, the best instance is Queen Elizabeth I.³

The reason why women were not allowed to act in theatres is an intriguing one. No law forbade women from being on the stage; in other countries in Europe, it was completely normal to see women performing. It is odd as women were able to perform at different places, namely masques, where instruments were played, and women and men would dance and conduct performances for nobles throughout the fifteen and sixteen hundreds in England. Some entertainments were displayed in country house estates, which were mini-plays that were put on for the queen.⁴ It is believed that women were permitted to perform due to the location as this was more

¹ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 5th February 2023]

² Lucas Garcia, *Writers Theatre*, 2018, <<https://www.writerstheatre.org/blog/gender-shakespeares-stage-history/>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

³ Lucas Garcia, *Writers Theatre*, 2018, <<https://www.writerstheatre.org/blog/gender-shakespeares-stage-history/>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

⁴ Elizabeth Steinway, *The Conversation*, 2022, <<https://theconversation.com/why-werent-women-allowed-to-act-in-shakespeares-plays-177804>> [accessed 6th February 2023]

intimate and restricted and connected with the higher classes. However, it was viewed as unbecoming and improper for women to act, as a career, in public.

A reason why these constraints were forced on women could be connected to many harsh opinions of acting from the public. The Puritan writer and political figure William Prynne summed these opinions up in a statement saying:

‘that popular stage-players are sinful, heathenish, lewd, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions...And that the profession of play-poets, of stage-players; together with the penning, acting, and frequenting of stage-plays, are unlawful, infamous and unseemly Christians.’⁵

Opposers to the theatre argued that these performances were sinful as they influenced people to observe a godless display instead of going to church or work. They considered acting obscene for women to take part in and to benefit financially from these public entertainments.

While numerous writers criticised and censured the custom of men sporting women’s clothing when performing, they felt this was still superior to having women turn into public displays. While women were not allowed to perform through this time, they had a crucial part in the production of the plays. Women could be involved with the clothing, collecting entry fees, selling refreshments, and even possessing theatres.⁶

It seemed the audience was not very concerned with young boys playing women. The traveller and writer Thomas Coryat wrote about female actors while travelling through Venice, stating:

‘For I saw women act...and they performed it with as good a grace, action, gesture, and whatsoever convenient for a player, as ever I saw any masculine actor.’⁷

Coryat did not think that women playing female characters would be instinctively better or superior to men playing these roles.

The influence of these male actors that played women could be seen in Shakespeare’s works. It is apparent that in the comedy plays written in the 1590s; he wrote roles for the young men he had at his disposal. These men had the physique to play youthful teenage girls, and Shakespeare wrote characters for them specifically. This seemingly is why we have characters

⁵ William Prynne, *Sir John Soane’s Museum London*, <<http://collections.soane.org/b7405>> [accessed 6th February 2023]

⁶ Elizabeth Steinway, *The Conversation*, 2022, <<https://theconversation.com/why-werent-women-allowed-to-act-in-shakespeares-plays-177804>> [accessed 6th February 2023]

⁷ Peter J. Smith, *Social Shakespeare*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (1995)

like Rosalind, Olivia, and Viola. It is apparent that by around 1605, Shakespeare's The King's Men company had a male actor who could play adult and older women remarkably. Shakespeare wrote Cleopatra, Volumnia, and Lady Macbeth.⁸ Emma Smith asserts that:

'Early on in the period it seems to be that the most important thing about going to a play is hearing the words. That quite quickly gets overtaken by an emphasis on visual spectacle.'⁹

New research has found that while men may have controlled the renaissance stage, women investors lead the force backing one of the principal theatres in the 1600s. Scholars uncovered that women comprised a substantial part of the momentary consortium that backed the Fortune playhouse, which was partially constructed by an actor who was the muse of Christopher Marlowe, and the building in which Thomas Middleton's plays were initially performed. New research has discovered that women composed one-third of the theatre's investors from the 1620s to 1650. There were seventy-one financial backers, twenty-four of which were women, and on occasion, women held the bulk of the shares. Some of these shares were acquired through inheritance, and some were brought regardless of not being involved in theatres before. King's College London professor Lucy Munro has been investigating the theatre and states that it was a surprise to uncover that women played such a substantial part, regarding finances, in the playhouse. Munro asserts:

'This challenges the stereotype of the early modern all-male stage and the idea that it's completely dominated by men. We know that the people who performed in plays at the Fortune were men and boys, but I find it really exciting that these women thought that the theatre was for them, and that it wasn't just for men.'¹⁰

The Fortune playhouse was constructed by Edward Alleyn in 1600. Alleyn was a top-tier leading actor and built the theatre with his wife's stepfather, Philip Henslowe, who was the paramount playhouse owner in England during this era. The building was initially open-air and wooden, causing it to burn down in a fire in 1621, eight years after Shakespeare's Globe met a similar end.¹¹ The theatre was rebuilt in brick, and to fund this:

⁸ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 7th February 2023]

⁹ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 7th February 2023]

¹⁰ Dalya Alberge, *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/dec/11/revealed-how-women-bankrolled-rival-to-17th-century-globe-theatre?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_t_gu&utm_medium&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1670754240> [accessed 8th February 2023]

¹¹ Anniina Jokinen, *Luminarium*, 2001, <<https://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/fortune.htm>> [accessed 8th February 2023]

‘Alleyn created a 12-part lease, issuing full and half shares in the second Fortune to investors who paid £83 6s 8d for a full share and £41 13s 4d for a half share. This would be around £11,000 and £5,500 today, so leaseholders had to be relatively well-off.’¹²

The majority of the women that contributed financially were middle-class women; most were wives, daughters and widows of well-established theatre players, merchants and government officials. Most of these women were educated enough to sign their names, and the more illiterates would leave symbols on lawful contracts. Theatres were able to generate substantial amounts of money. The playhouse was knocked down in 1661 when the land was brought for the building of private residences. The theatre’s investors comprised of The Fortune’s bricklayer Thomas Wiggitt’s widow, Margaret Wayte Wiggitt, and Elizabeth Pierpoint, a woman who had inherited the shares from a late employer.¹³

Ellen Burbage was another woman who also had ownership of a playhouse. Her family was also in the industry; her husband, James Burbage, was a manager of a company, and her son was the celebrated actor Richard Burbage. Women played a more prominent role when clothing became a bigger priority. At the start of this period, the most significant part of the play was listening to the dialogue and monologues; this soon changed when the emphasis was put on visual entertainment, which began with the clothing the actors wore and then followed special effects. This led to the expansion of an exceedingly busy field of dressmakers, wigmakers, and costumiers surrounding the theatre quarter. A great deal of these trades were managed and worked by women.¹⁴

After John Brayne passed away in 1586, his widow Margaret Brayne pursued her legal right to her late husband’s theatre, which he owned with James Burbage, and the theatre’s financial surplus. Margaret started a lengthy legal conflict that continued long after she died; Margaret even positioned herself at the entry of the playhouse in an effort to gather ticket money personally. Ralph Miles, a juvenile witness in one of the law cases, recounted how he was:

¹² Dalya Alberge, *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/dec/11/revealed-how-women-bankrolled-rival-to-17th-century-globe-theatre?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_t_gu&utm_medium&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1670754240> [accessed 8th February 2023]

¹³ Dalya Alberge, *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/dec/11/revealed-how-women-bankrolled-rival-to-17th-century-globe-theatre?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_t_gu&utm_medium&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1670754240> [accessed 8th February 2023]

¹⁴ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 10th February 2023]

‘requested by Margaret Brayne and [his father] Robert Miles...to go with them to the theatre upon a play day to stand at the door that goeth up to the galleries of the said theatre to take and receive for the use of the said Margaret half the money that should be given to come up unto the said galleries at that door.’¹⁵

In an intense argument, ‘Richard Burbage and his mother set upon him with a broomstaff calling him murdering knave with other vile and unionist words.’¹⁶ The confrontation exhibits independent women staking their claim to the theatre and affirming their own actions, possession, and stake in the theatrical scene.

The playhouse was conducting itself in trade relations with a fellow playhouse named The Curtain throughout these years. Margret additionally claimed fifty percent of the surplus of The Curtain in legal proceedings. A substantial amount of legal papers from countless playhouse-related lawsuits have survived. These lawsuits reveal how Brayne requested the court of law to view her earnestly as a theatre owner and a vital part of Shoreditch’s theatre scene; these documents also request the documents’ readers to do similar.¹⁷

Women’s most critical role in the growth of playhouses was as audience members. Many religious and priggish men greatly took exception to women being theatre enthusiasts, mainly when the initial ensemble cast plays were exchanged for plays written as means to display sole celebrated actors, namely Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage. The opinions of these religious men can be seen through puritan William Prynne, who described these women as ‘over-addled consumers and ... over-engaged or over-emotional spectators’.¹⁸ As the 1600s advanced, women attended the theatre in soaring quantities; they were influenced by and, coincidentally, played a part in the transfer from exterior playhouses to interior playhouses.

The exterior playhouses were big, inexpensive, and open to the working class. They were exuberant and rough environments, so when it came to women attending these venues, they were seen as promiscuous and sinful.

¹⁵ Callan Davies, *Before Shakespeare*, 2018, <<https://beforeshakespeare.com/2018/12/10/engendering-before-shakespeare-women-and-early-english-playhouse-ownership/>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

¹⁶ Callan Davies, *Before Shakespeare*, 2018, <<https://beforeshakespeare.com/2018/12/10/engendering-before-shakespeare-women-and-early-english-playhouse-ownership/>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

¹⁷ Callan Davies, *Engendering The Stage*, 2018, <<https://engenderingthestage.humanities.mcmaster.ca/tag/ellen-burbage/>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

¹⁸ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 10th February 2023]

Women were often seen as prostitutes seeking clients. Interior playhouses were completely dissimilar environments. These theatres were on a much smaller scale and cost higher inside the city walls. They were viewed as a location that was more suitable for respectable women.¹⁹

Many women possessed and managed inns that were used as entertainment places. David Kathman expressed that:

‘three of these four inns were owned or leased by women during their time as playhouses. Margaret Craythorne owned or leased the Bell Savage from 1568 until her death in 1591, Alice Layton owned the Cross keys from 1571 until her death in 1590, and Joan Harrison was the proprietor of the Bull from the death of her husband Matthew in 1584 to her own death in 1589.’²⁰

In conclusion, while women were not allowed to act or perform on the public stage, they played a crucial role in the background and production of plays. Women owned theatres and inns where plays were performed. Women rarely, if ever, brought these plays; in truth, they seemed to either inherit these places through their fathers or husbands. Women played a vital role in the plays’ costumes, makeup and backgrounds. King Charles II legally permitted women to act professionally; however, this did not end society’s stigma of women acting, and the expectations for women to stay at home still persisted after women could act.

¹⁹ Emma Smith, *University of Oxford*, 2019, <<https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/invisible-influential-women-and-theatre-shakespeares-time>> [accessed 10th February 2023]

²⁰ David Kathman, ‘Alice Layton and the Cross Keys’, *JSTOR*, vol.22, (2009), p.144-178, (p.144) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24322802>> [accessed 11th February 2023]

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