

‘Put up de Cloaks!’: The Embodied Experience of  
Female Spectatorship in Seventeenth-Century Theatre

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## **Abstract**

### **‘Put up de Cloaks!’: The Embodied Experience of Female Spectatorship in Seventeenth-Century Theatre**

**Brianne Colon**

This thesis delves into the social and material experience of female spectatorship in seventeenth-century theatre. Throughout the seventeenth-century, a woman compromised her sexuality each time she attended a performance through her alignment with the prostitutes operating in the audience and the bawdy representations of herself onstage. By positioning herself alongside other female spectators in the audience and making them privy to her physical and emotional needs, she was able to minimize the threat the theatre posed to her sexual modesty and obtain a degree of privacy within the multiple and intersecting lines of sight in the playhouse. With the help of masks, fabric, disguises and female-female discourse, women established private codes of communication within the theatre and were able to shape themselves accordingly before the theatrical gaze. As the century progressed and female sexuality became increasingly mediated through the spectacle of the actress onstage, women grew all the more dependent on each other’s company within the theatre and learned to exploit this vulnerability to their own ends. Using meta-theatrical episodes from Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, James Shirley, Margaret Cavendish, William D’Avenant, Thomas Shadwell and John Dennis, this thesis charts the trajectory of female sociability in the theatre, focusing on Renaissance, Caroline and Restoration drama. It shows that the contemporary theatre may position women alongside one another in the restroom queue but women’s alliances with each other’s bodies at the playhouse have deep roots in seventeenth-century theatre.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One..... “Privy Information: Cloaking in the Renaissance Theatre”	16
Chapter Two..... “Talking Back: Voicing the Female Spectator in Caroline Drama”	50
Chapter Three..... “Disguising the Bawdy: Masking in the Restoration Theatre”	75
Conclusion.....	100
Works Cited.....	102

“Sight creates a bond between spectator and event, which of necessity implicates the observer.”  
(Marsden *Fatal* 22)

“The centrality of the female body to the workings of patriarchal order was largely premised not on the regulation of women by men, but on that of women by women.” (Gowing 48)

“Take your places, ladies.” (Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.84)

## Introduction

As much pleasure as the theatre can be said to afford, it has also historically offered its fair share of danger to its female audience. While nowadays, this threat may come from what Laura Mulvey has famously shown as the scopophilic and masculine gaze of the cinema, Jean Howard has also noted that as early as the Renaissance, many saw the playhouse as “the dangerous place for [a] woman to be” (“Women” 70) on account of her proximity to and association with the prostitutes operating throughout the auditorium. Given the four-hundred year gap between these two historical periods – not to mention a complete shift in the types of performances under discussion – it is interesting to consider how women in the theatre are, and have always been, somehow threatened. I have always experienced my sense of vulnerability most acutely in one particular area of the theatre: the restroom. More than anywhere else in the theatre, it is within the restroom queue, the restroom walls and the restroom stalls that my anxiety in the theatre manifests most severely and my own sense of vulnerability kicks into overdrive. The theatre restroom is often dirty, overcrowded and unlike most public restrooms when simply going to the next stall alleviates the threat of abjection that lurks around (and within) certain bowls, the fixed nature of much theatrical performance –

“fixed” in terms of start, end and intermission times – means that there is such a flux of activity during certain times in the performance that going to the next stall is simply not an option. Often, the number of stalls and the amount of patrons needing those stalls does not correspond. This forces those not quick enough out of their seats to create a queue and limits the choosing of a different stall. And, through sheer anatomical logistics, the queue for the women’s restroom is usually much longer.

While in line, we cling to a silence regarding our impending performances within the stalls. Once in the stalls, we cling to this silence even harder, waiting for a neighbourly flush. We feel, or at least I feel, shame surrounding my body that does not correspond with my usual candor regarding my bodily functions. My own sense of shame initially gave rise to the casual questioning of how long this vulnerability had been a problem for women in the theatre. More recently, it has given rise to the question of why. Why this vulnerability? More to the point, why this increased vulnerability when removed from the (supposedly) objectifying masculine gaze of the theatre and subject solely to the gaze, and ears, of other women? The ways in which we hide every noise from each other and our self-consciousness surrounding our restroom behavior comes very close to the type of silence Eve Sedgwick has associated with the homosexual closet:

‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.

(3)

Through this inability to crinkle a wrapper or discuss defecation, those using the ladies' restroom are participating in an act of closeting – a closeting from each other. We are unable to discuss our impending actions; we perform this silence as a means of closeting our bodies from one another.

But the question remains – why? Why does the theatre create a venue wherein we feel the need to hide our bodily functions from those who share our anatomical concerns? Apart from the abject nature of “these body fluids, this defilement, this shit” (Kristeva 3), it seems that the performative nature of the theatre at large contributes to this self-conscious act of closeting. As spectators, we are bound together in the spectacle. From our seats and beyond, we are part of the spectacle onstage and are always participants in the performance, even during the intermission. We exist in a reciprocal relationship with those onstage and those around us. Although Mulvey uses film in her discussion of the male gaze, a medium that cannot look back at its audience, she is no less convinced that those in the auditorium become bound in the spectacle, as well.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (20)

The female onscreen may not look back at the audience but the audience is irrevocably changed by her eroticized presence. Mulvey suggests that the women in the auditorium are objectified alongside the onscreen woman and the men in the auditorium “activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent [the] threat” (25-6) of castration that the female star, and thus the female spectator, evoke. Mary Ann Doane continues on this



perspective, noting that the onscreen woman is “more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3-dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control” (133). Like Mulvey, she posits that the female spectator’s danger comes from her association with this static representation of femininity that is meant solely for male spectatorial pleasure.

While I agree with Mulvey’s 1979 perspective that Hollywood continues to produce a large percentage of less-than-feminist films, I am still not entirely convinced that my own negative experience comes exclusively from this male gaze, or whether the theatrical gaze can ever be entirely male. My most negative experiences in the theatre have always come when completely removed from men and I am consequently much more interested in the ways in which women’s vulnerability to each other is heightened through the self-conscious relationship we have for centuries had to each other’s bodies. As such, this project examines the history of the relationship women have, and have had, to each other’s bodies while in the theatre. It briefly takes up the history of the female theatre restroom but more importantly showcases how women’s vulnerability within the theatre has as much to do with women as it does with men.

Feminist historians have done their fair share to tell the story of women’s victimization at the hands of men and there is no doubt that the need for this story continues. Until very recently, my project was attempting to tell this story as well and there is certainly still an important part of it that does. Fortunately, I have realized that this is not the end of the story. My story follows with Mulvey’s and others’ arguments in showing how women have long been objectified at the hands of men in the playhouse but I take this one step further to show how this objectification has continued even when we

are solely in the company of women. I use the seventeenth century as an integral starting point in the history of public theatre as the seventeenth century certainly gave rise to mass-attended dramatic productions in fixed performance venues. Through my examination of meta-theatrical and historical episodes of female spectatorship, I have unearthed an early modern female network in the theatre which I will show as both helpful and detrimental to women in the theatre. Many critics have sought to explain the danger that the theatre holds for women but this project takes this one step further to explore the ways in which women could have used each other to minimize this danger and the ways in which women were simply used by each other. Just as I am still afraid to crinkle a wrapper before my fellow female spectators, women have long been regulating each other's bodies and actions in – and out of – the playhouse walls.

Before this story begins, it is important to set the stage (as it were) of the seventeenth-century playhouse. I will go into more detail surrounding particular seating arrangements and playhouse dimensions in each of my subsequent chapters but a brief chronology of the changing seventeenth-century playhouse will help to situate the theatrical situation of the century. I locate the birth of commercial English theatre in the late-sixteenth century, with the construction of the Red Lion theatre in 1567. Unlike medieval drama – which took place in churches, great halls and the streets – most Renaissance drama took place in playhouses constructed for the sole purpose of theatre,<sup>1</sup> making these the first such fixed sites of performance in England. In the fifty years following the Red Lion's construction, at least 10 more commercial playhouses were

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<sup>1</sup> Theatre may have been the prescribed function of most Renaissance playhouses but the eventual saturation of the market did call for many theatre owners to use their playhouses for other types of entertainment on non-performance days. Philip Henslowe, for instance, used The Rose theatre for animal- and bear-baiting on Thursday afternoons.

opened<sup>2</sup> showing the immense popularity of playgoing. As Elizabeth I attended many theatrical productions and admission began at a one-penny fee, it is unsurprising that many Londoners flocked to the theatre on a regular basis. Sometimes, this flocking took up the better part of a day as all of the open-air amphitheatres were located outside London's city limits and required a definite trek; most playhouses were situated either in Shoreditch or on the Southbank of the Thames. Although there is much discrepancy between each individual theatre's dimensions, there seem to have been certain playhouse conventions of the time: open-air playing arenas with more than one level of gallery seating; a pit in the middle for groundlings to attend at a penny-fee; and a stage protruding well into the audience around which (and sometimes, upon which) the audience would have gathered and stood. Given the open-air nature of these playhouses, attending a play in the afternoon (the only time performances were offered so that the daylight could be used) often meant getting wet or dirty from standing beneath the open sky.

Throughout the Renaissance, monarchical support for the theatre was high but the early Renaissance playhouses were considered by many to be a breeding ground of sin and sickness. As the Renaissance continued, this opinion created the need and desire for indoor playhouses which would serve a more private and elite audience. Two of the main indoor theatres in use at the close of the Renaissance included the Cockpit theatre, which was "sometimes called the Phoenix once it was rebuilt after being burned... in 1617"

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Volume 1: Origins to 1600* lists the theatre openings as follows: the Red Lion in 1567, the Theatre in 1576, the Curtain in 1577, the Rose in 1587, [the Swan in 1595], the Globe in 1599, the Fortune in 1600, the Red Bull in 1605, Whitefriars in 1606, the Cockpit in 1609, the rebuilding of the Globe in 1614 which coincided with the opening of the Hope. (Milling and Thomson xviii-xxix).

(Gurr “Cockpit”) and the second Blackfriars theatre, which was built in 1597 by James Burbage. Both theatres were smaller indoor venues tailored to a more aristocratic audience and seem to anticipate the smaller playhouses with a higher entrance fee that would become popular during the Restoration. Other more private theatrical venues of the time included the banqueting halls at Whitehall – used in court and masque performances – and the Cockpit-in-Court which housed court theatrics after Inigo Jones converted it from a cockfighting ring in 1630.

The public (and slightly more private) theatre continued to flourish until 1642 when Oliver Cromwell ascended to power, closed the London public theatres and demanded a dismantling of many playhouses. While there were a few private theatrical venues that continued to stage productions throughout the Interregnum, these were much more private affairs and did not cater to the public in the way that the amphitheatres and indoor theatres had in the past. Fortunately for the state of theatre, the Commonwealth ended with Charles II’s ascension to the throne in 1660 and his reopening of the theatres in London. After the eighteen-year closure, he created two new theatre companies – the Duke’s Company headed by William D’Avenant and the King’s Company headed by Thomas Killigrew – both of which held a monopoly on the London theatrical scene for many years. Along with these two new companies, Charles II was also responsible for another innovation on the English public stage: the English actress. Prior to and during the Renaissance, female roles were most often acted by boy-players and the idea of women in the theatre – let alone onstage – had caused many anti-theatricalists to label women in the playhouse as “notorious whores” (Prynne). Having spent much of the Interregnum in France and witnessed French acting troupes already employing women,

Charles II's avid support of the theatre (and of the ladies) meant that for the first time, women were regularly allowed on the English public stage.

In her extensive study of women in the Restoration playhouse, Jean Marsden suggests that the English actress's "appearance made possible the use of female sexuality not simply as discourse but as genuine spectacle" (*Fatal 3*) and was popular from the start. Aside from the spectacle of the female body, many of the more spectacular spatial elements of theatre that are still in use today also come from the Restoration playhouses: the proscenium arch (the imaginary 'fourth wall' between the actors and audience); moveable scenery (wings, borders and shutters) and a playing area in front of the proscenium arch which would have housed most of the playing action as well as provided greater intimacy between the actors and audience. By the close of the seventeenth-century, English public theatre often relied on the female body as a prime source of spectacle and had become quite similar to what continues to exist today.

These fixed spectatorial sites would have brought many different types of people together under one roof. As most performances were available to anyone willing to pay the appropriate fee, people from all walks of life would have been subjected and visible to each other in a way that many other public venues did not allow. This increased visibility led to the creation of a theatrical gaze within the playhouse walls. My argument that female spectators could have relied upon female-female discourse within the theatre in order to circumvent this gaze presupposes a few concepts that warrant further discussion before we move into each of the chapters.

Although no gaze is ever unilateral in terms of scope, the seventeenth-century theatrical gaze existed and subsisted via a complex network of interlocking gazes. For

seventeenth-century theatregoers, watching the stage, the other theatregoers and knowing they were being watched were all important and understood aspects of theatregoing. Janet Hill has explained this gaze, calling it an “‘it-is-important-that-we-both-know-that-I-see-you, -and-that-I-know-that-you-see-me’ situation” (7). The idea of a seventeenth-century theatrical gaze encompasses both looking and being looked at while in the playhouse. It is important to distinguish the theatrical gaze from other types of gazes because theatre, by default, demands sight to thrive and sight, as Marsden suggests, always implicates the observer. Within the playhouse, each individual spectator’s line of sight worked together to create an overall matrix of inseparable gazes. Whether looking at the stage, looking at the audience or looking at those other spectators who were looking back at them, spectators could never have separated the various lines of sight within the playhouse. Through the acts of looking and of knowing that those around them could look, too, spectators entered into a reciprocal relationship with the overall spectacle, simultaneously making them subjects and objects of this gaze. Many theatrical patrons thrived on their visibility within the theatrical realm and happily subjected themselves to this gaze. In the Renaissance, those seated in the Lord’s boxes were as visible as those onstage and paid a premium for this visibility; after the Restoration, those seated in the stage-boxes had excellent visibility of both the stage and the other spectators within the theatre and could easily put themselves on display, as well. In both halves of the century, going to the theatre meant consciously putting oneself on display and many women eagerly participated in this performance.

However, for many younger, unmarried women, being on display in the seventeenth-century playhouse was not without its problems. Dympna Callaghan has

explained that within the communal gaze of the theatre, women became “spectacles to rival the plays” (142). Marsden furthers this point by explaining that like the objectification inherent in Mulvey’s cinematic gaze “much Restoration and early-eighteenth-century drama depended on a display of the eroticized woman for its visual and emotional effect” (*Fatal* 9). Women in the audience were scrutinized at bawdy moments in the dialogue and many feigned innocence by tailoring their outward reactions to protect their virtue. While my conception of the seventeenth-century theatrical gaze is much different than the twentieth-century cinematic gaze as described by Mulvey, both gazes work to objectify their fair share of theatre patrons, particularly female patrons. Chapter three takes particular interest in examining how this gaze assumed a somewhat more predatory nature in terms of its scrutiny of female sexuality but each chapter charts the trajectory of this theatrical gaze to show why many female spectators felt the need to control their outward comportment in the theatre and how they communally participated in a type of performance before the theatrical gaze.

While the relationship between women and each other’s bodies has long been a topic in seventeenth-century criticism, far fewer critics have turned their focus to this relationship within public space. Harriette Andreadis explains how the intimacy afforded to women in the more private spaces of the seventeenth century allowed for a rise in a “language of female friendship and intimacy” and terms this language “a ‘double discourse’” (241); Gail Kern Paster has noted that “women in early modern Europe ordinarily gave birth under conditions monitored only by other women” (*Body* 165) highlighting the role women played in each other’s embodiment; Elizabeth A. Brown furthers this point by focussing on Elizabeth I’s Privy Chamber, compiled of sixteen

women who attended to her private (excretory, bodily) needs. In each of these cases, we see how early modern women's relationships to each other can be said to have relied upon a heightened sense of intimacy as rooted in the female body.

I term this female intimate sociability a 'female-female discourse' and in each chapter examine the ways in which this female-female discourse was used within the theatre at various historical moments. Outside of the theatre, this female-female discourse afforded women entrance to the most recessed areas within the home – the most private of which was the closet. Many have explained how the early modern woman's closet was "a private rather than a public space" (Drouin 94), a space in which "things, as well as people, could be hidden" (Jankowski 302). Its more peripheral positioning within the home signals a type of intimate sociability based on the contours (and users) of that room. Aristocratic men and women would have each had their own closets in which they were able to capture privacy within the home, albeit in very varying degrees and to different ends. For a gentleman, "withdrawing into the privacy of the closet [signalled] an extension of his role as public and political being" (Straznicki *Privacy* 116). A woman's retirement into her closet signalled an entrance into a much more private type of discourse, a sociability based on the confines of the space and the contours of her body. Whereas the gentleman's closet functioned as a type of study or den, a woman's closet allowed for female transactions that were "usually invisible to the male gaze" (Drouin 90). I am therefore interested in the ways in which this private sociability would have extended into public space and been useful for women within the theatre.



Although the notions of private and public are of paramount importance throughout this paper, I do not wish to apply Jürgen Habermas's notions of the bourgeois public sphere to seventeenth-century theatrical space. Instead, I use the terms "public" and "private" to denote increased and decreased visibility within both the domestic and non-domestic spheres of seventeenth-century London. In terms of the privacy afforded by the domestic closet to members of both sexes, the closet's peripheral positioning within the home meant one had to remove oneself from the more visible meeting areas of the house – such as the reception rooms – in order to enter into it. In terms of the public space of the theatre, the act of cloaking would have afforded women privacy by allowing for decreased visibility in front of the theatrical gaze. Although women closeting their bodies while in the theatre may seem unlikely owing to the lack of actual closets in the playhouse, women helping one another cloak their bodies seems to me a logical public extension of the early modern practices of capturing privacy within the home. Just as "closets feature in any attempt to capture privacy, to give it a local habitation and a name" (Orlin 297), cloaking within the theatre would have allowed women to reassume control over their own visibility by capturing privacy, whenever necessary, before the theatrical gaze.

One of the ways I will show this relief is by examining how female spectators used fabric, masks and disguises while in the theatre in order to cloak their bodies, their emotions and each other. Each woman's conscious controlling of her outward comportment relates to the experience of being embodied before a theatrical gaze. As spectators, we are present in the audience within our individual bodies while participating in the larger, communal spectacle. Each hunger pang, stifled cough and bursting bladder

takes our focus away from the spectacle occurring around us to the events occurring within us. While the most externally visible moments of embodiment occur when the body's thresholds are compromised – sexually, excretorily or otherwise – the seventeenth-century female spectator was repeatedly embodied through the intense scrutiny directed at her body while at the theatre. Her blush during bawdy dramatic moments would have denoted sexual knowledge; her method of dress might have garnered her increased attention as an erotic spectacle. In John Dennis's 1697 *A Plot, and No Plot*, the bawd Frowzy arrives to the theatre out of breath and has to enlist her daughter's aid to compose herself before displaying herself in front of the theatrical gaze. While the theatrical gaze may not have physically penetrated the thresholds of each woman's body, it certainly ensured that the women in the audience were made very aware of their bodies, forcing them to either cloak their bodies when unwanted moments of embodiment took over or to tailor their reactions to suit a self-conscious performance.

My aim in the examination of this female-female discourse and its potential for relief in the theatre is to expose this female sociability's potential for resistance to the larger theatrical gaze. The theatrical gaze may have functioned differently than the gaze of the domestic realm but this female-female discourse would have provided relief from both. Considering the overabundant fabric in seventeenth-century women's fashion, women's potential for cloaking through this fabric and discourse shows "how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may be the same positioning be enabled through others" (Sedgwick 32). My definition of cloaking includes shielding one's body with fabric, hiding one's face behind a mask and the tailoring of one's "outward appearances" (Pritchard) to enact a self-conscious performance. As many women

attended the theatre in groups, with their maids, or as “Winchester Geese” clumped together in the gallery’s most upper rungs, it seems likely that female-female discourse would have had a place in theatrical life.

In order to fully understand the place of this female-female discourse in the seventeenth-century theatre, I look at meta-theatrical episodes involving female spectators and examine how these women use each other to shape their own theatrical realities. Jean Marsden has rightly noted that “very few documents survive [from the seventeenth century]... which provide a firsthand account of a woman’s response to the theater” (*Fatal* 12). In lieu of these firsthand accounts, I examine meta-theatrical representations of female spectators to unearth trends about seventeenth-century female spectatorship that might otherwise be unavailable to us today. Although these dramatic accounts may not represent the exact seventeenth-century playgoing condition, it is certain that what was written for the seventeenth-century theatre is one of the best places to search for an understanding of the actual seventeenth-century theatrical situation.

In chapter one, I look at five meta-theatrical episodes from Shakespeare and Ben Jonson which show how female embodiment within the public space of the theatre was always contained by female-female discourse. In chapter two, I look at two plays by James Shirley and Margaret Cavendish to show the dangers associated with female spectators taking to the stage and making themselves part of the onstage spectacle. In chapter three, using William D’Avenant’s, Thomas Shadwell’s and John Dennis’s plays, I show how along with the advent of the actress onstage came an increased vulnerability for all women in the theatre, making this female-female discourse more necessary than ever. In each chapter, I propose that the intimate relationship women had to each other’s

bodies outside of the theatre would have been used in the theatre as a means of temporarily circumventing the threat that the seventeenth-century theatre created. I show how female spectators worked together and used masks, cloaks and other types of disguises to temporarily remove themselves from and shape themselves in the theatrical gaze. Although all of this may seem a far cry from contemporary theatre restrooms, my purpose in highlighting these moments of female sociability in the seventeenth-century theatre is to show that then, much like now, women were associated with each other through their like-sexed bodies while in the theatre. Moreover, I show that this association with each other's bodies, while helping to alleviate some of the danger, would have also placed female spectators in a particularly vulnerable position with each other – a position that continues to this day.

## Chapter One – Privy Information: Cloaking in the Renaissance Theatre

Just before Mrs. Overdo rents Ursula's chamber pot in Ben Jonson's 1614 *Bartholomew Fair*, the bawd Captain Whit yells to Ursula to "put up de cloaks" (4.4.188). Everyone has gathered at the annual Bartholomew Fair for the day to participate in the fair's festivities and when nature inevitably calls, the women in the fair must enlist the aid of a "pig woman" to relieve themselves. Once rented, this chamber pot – situated "within" (4.4.200) – is curtained off from the rest of the group and privy to the women users alone. In this brief episode, we see how Whit's proposal of putting "up de cloaks" works to enlist the women present (Ursula and Mrs. Overdo) in a privy relationship with each other's bodies. The cloaking of female embodiment signals a more general type of cloaking that seems to have been concentrated around the female body in seventeenth-century English public life.

While Ben Jonson provides a dramatic representation of a woman renting her chamber to other women at a fair, there is much less indication of how women would have related to each other within the public space of the theatre. Whereas the seventeenth-century domestic gaze centralized within the meeting spaces of the house – the reception rooms, the dining room, even bedrooms – the theatrical gaze was prevalent throughout the auditorium, upon the stage and in the lobby of the theatre. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Ursula allows two women in the play to use her chamber pot "within" (4.4.200) and escape being watched by those in attendance at the fair. As such, I aim to locate this social space "within" the theatre and will use meta-theatrical representations of female spectatorship and sociability as my guide.

By associating female spectatorship with certain pejorative trends, Jonson and Shakespeare rely on many of the same tactics to show the place of female spectatorship within the Renaissance spectating arena. Each playwright establishes a gaze within the theatre and shows their ladies as fully conscious of this gaze. They both show female spectatorship as a somewhat passive endeavour, even if Jonson attempts to combat this with a much more realistic portrayal of the types of women in attendance at Renaissance performances. While Shakespeare positions his female spectators in the audience alongside men, Jonson places four women onstage together as a means of calling attention to the benefits of mutual and social engagement that women could have enjoyed at the theatre. As women could have relied on the aid of other women in the theatre to control their own visibility, each playwright uses varying degrees of female sociability within the theatre to display this trend. Through the physical cloaking of their embodiment and the metaphoric cloaking of their discourse and reactions, women could have used the female-female discourse learned within the home in the more public areas of town. By examining these representations in Jonson's and Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvres alongside the actual materiality of seventeenth-century playgoing, a greater understanding emerges surrounding the Renaissance female spectator.

In order to understand the female spectator, we must first locate her in the crowd. In figure one, a 1596 drawing done by Johannes de Witt of the Swan theatre – “the only amphitheatre of whose interior we have any representation” (Wilson 71) – we see each of the traditional amphitheatre features well displayed. There is little extant visual evidence with which to verify de Witt's sketch but this representation has become one of the most widely cited examples in any reconstruction of the Renaissance playhouse's interior.



Figure One: Johannes de Witt's 1596 drawing of the Swan.

From this image, we see the varying places in which a spectator could have arranged herself in a Renaissance playhouse, provided she had the proper admission price. The least expensive audience position was as a groundling, costing 1 penny and securing her a standing spot in the pit, beneath the open skies. This was followed by 2 pennies admission for any of the galleries (those tiered levels of seating around the theatre's perimeter) and 3 pennies for one of the gentlemen's rooms, located in the mid-gallery very close to (but not behind) either side of the stage. The Lord's boxes, directly behind the stage, were the most expensive at 6 pennies per person and the high price of these seats speaks volumes as to the desirability of being not only able to see the stage, but also being very easily seen by the rest of the audience.

Janet Hill notes that these "commercial public playhouses... for the first time in the history of English theatre offered players permanent acting sites" (Hill 115). They would have also for the first time offered spectators more permanent spectatorial sites. Spectators attending from all over the city would have journeyed to these theatres and the

culture of play-going was born. Although the theatre attracted much negative attention through anti-theatricalist pamphlets,<sup>3</sup> it also attracted an estimated “15,000 people weekly” (Gurr 260) as early as 1594.

During this time, play-going had the potential to be an all-day affair. Owing to the open-air nature of the playhouses, performances took place in middle of the day in order to take advantage of the natural light. As the early Renaissance playhouses were positioned outside the city limits – concentrated in Shoreditch and Bankside – attending a play in the afternoon meant making one’s way to an approximately two-hour performance and then making one’s way home again. If travelling to the Southbank, this meant either hiring a ferryman to row you across (provided you had enough money), or trekking over London Bridge, the sole bridge across the Thames in the seventeenth century. As only “15 or 20 per cent of all the people living within walking distance of Shoreditch and Southwark were regular playgoers” (Gurr 261), it is clear that the culture of play-going attracted more than just the theatre’s neighbours.

The playhouse as a fixed arena of performance and spectatorship was still a relatively new phenomenon in the Renaissance. Church being perhaps the only comparable fixed space of spectatorship in this era, I am careful of drawing too explicit a parallel between the two experiences. Although Pamela Allen Brown suggests that “women sat separately from men in church” (56), no where do we see this type of space demarcated in the Renaissance theatre.<sup>4</sup> Women may have sat alongside one another but

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<sup>3</sup> When Stephen Gosson published his anti-theatricalist pamphlet in the early 1580s, he used many of the popular belief surrounding theatre of the time: “The spokesmen for Puritan London described playhouse audiences and riotous and immoral; the poets described them as ignorant and wilful; the City Fathers regarded them as riotous and seditious” (Gurr 261).

<sup>4</sup> While women would not have sat separately from men in the theatre, there was at least one area of gender congregation in the Globe playhouse located in the gallery’s most upper-rung; the ‘Winchester Geese’ were



it does not seem as though there would have been fixed areas of gender congregation within the playhouse walls. Instead, women from all levels of society could have been found throughout the theatre, depending on the price of admission they were willing to pay. Jean Howard suggests how “in actuality, one’s place at the public theatre was determined less by one’s rank than by one’s ability to pay for choice or less choice place” (“Women” 69). Whether or not they were escorted, female playgoers of the Renaissance seem not to have been limited to any one space within the theatre.

Owing to the crowded nature of these playhouses, “actors and spectators were close to one another and could see, hear, and smell each other’s near presence” (116). This can be extended to include spectators’ experiences of each other’s presence, as well. In the close proximity of this “assembly” (Mazzio 183), Peggy Phelan comments on the inherent visibility of the Renaissance playhouse, calling attention to the playhouse’s “technology for exposing the elaborate ways in which we expose and hide ourselves, both from the audience we can see and the audience we call our intimates, ourselves” (20). This potential for exposing and hiding oneself relates to the performativity of one’s spectatorial position. In *Stages and Playgoers*, Janet Hill calls the exchange of gazes within the playhouse an “‘it-is-important-that-we-both-know-that-I-see-you, -and-that-I-know-you-see-me’ situation” (7). As cloaking would have provided a temporary arena in which to escape the theatrical gaze, the physical joining of fabrics or the social joining of the minds would have worked to conceal the female body in a variety of ways.

Jonson provides a literal example of cloaking when he positions Ursula’s rented chamber pot and its female lessee “within.” Although there are no explicit stage designs

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located on this third tier of seating and were the Globe playhouse’s resident prostitutes throughout the Renaissance.

dictating the confines of this space, it seems likely that a brief annual fair would have called more for tents and curtains than for walls and doors, through sheer ease of construction and disassembly. In the fourth edition of *The Shakespearean Stage*, Gurr adds in a paragraph-long positing of the excretory facilities available in the theatre. As far as urine is concerned, he proposes that “women might have had special pots under their skirts to receive their outflows, subsequently decanted into available buckets. Women did that at the Spanish theatres” (173). Whether or not English practices reflected the Spanish, the plentiful fabric on women’s outfits of the time would no doubt have provided a type of bodily shield from the gaze.

The 1609 plate in figure two shows a representation of regal female dress. Elizabeth I’s ermine cloak may be much more elaborate than those worn by common female playgoers but it shows the cloak’s potential to shield the female body – here, the royal female body – from the onlookers’ gaze. From the Groom of the Stool to Elizabeth I’s Privy Chamber,<sup>5</sup> a lot of energy went into making the regal body’s physical thresholds less visible. In figure three, we see a more common type of dress of the day. It is much simpler but there is still a plethora of fabric consuming the woman’s lower half. Although she lacks a cloak, it is clear from both of these images that female dress would have used a hefty amount of fabric, especially on the lower half of the body. Whether or not this fabric was used in the cloaking of female excretion within the theatre, its abundance signals its potential for this use. Even if standing in the pit, and therefore

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<sup>5</sup> Julian Yates discusses how “the monarch was accompanied by the Groom of the Stool [when they went to the privy” (92). Elizabeth A. Brown looks at the gynosomal sphere surrounding Elizabeth I and her embodiment: “Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber consisted of a semi-professional corps of women with sixteen paid and six or more unpaid positions.... Most had duties associated with her care, including supervising her linens, wardrobe, and jewels, assisting with dressing and personal hygiene, serving food, and nursing her during illness – duties that gave them close contact with her backstage persona” (132). That Elizabeth I is regarded as having a “backstage persona” at all suggests that there would have been a private arena wherein most of her excretory, toiletry and dressing needs were addressed.



Figures Two and Three: The image on the left, taken from the British Museum’s collection, is an engraving “used in Edward Grimstone’s ‘Historie of the Netherlands’ (1609)” (*British Museum*). It shows Elizabeth I decked in ermine finery. The image on the right, taken from the Victoria and Albert’s collection, is a dummy board, circa. 1640. It represents a more common method of English female dress.

more able to freely urinate on the ground,<sup>6</sup> women still could have used their own skirts to conceal their outflows.

Just as this fabric could have been individually useful, it seems likely that women could have used this fabric together to shield each other’s bodies when using what Gurr terms as “special pots.” As far as these pots are concerned, it seems likely that chamber pots would have had a place in the theatre. Just as Jonson has Ursula take her chamber pot with her to the fair, so too, may early modern women have taken chamber pots with them to the theatre. In Julian Bowsher and Pat Miller’s 2009 chronicling of the Rose’s

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<sup>6</sup> In a recent visit to the new Shakespeare Globe Theatre, my tour guide Martha said that while there would have been bucket boys attending to those seated in the galleries, women in the pit would have most likely urinated directly on the ground.

1988-91 excavations, they list two urinals found in the excavation. Although they do not chronicle any chamber pots, they do list multiple unidentifiable ceramic fragments found throughout the dig.<sup>7</sup> The lack of identifiable chamber pots discovered also supposes the portability of these pots and the likelihood that women would have brought them along with them to the theatre and then returned home with them at the end of the day. Certainly more entrepreneurial women, such as Ursula, would have recognized the potential for financial gain of a rentable chamber pot. Jonson's use of Ursula as the leaser of this pot cannot be imagined as an idea unique unto him.

While this is very clearly just one idea of how this may have worked, the materiality surrounding these items helps to better illuminate the practice itself. As no two of the hundreds of chamber pots I examined in the Museum of London's archaeological storehouse were the same, I have filtered my findings into three common trends regarding the construction of these seventeenth-century pots. The first set of images (figures four through six) shows the rather large openings of these pots. The size of these openings would allow for fewer missed targets in all matters of excretion. The second set of pots shows the varying styles of rims available, perfect for catching any wandering urine. The rims seldom sloped outward and for the most part seem conceived to aid in the better channelling of urine. The final set of images (ten to twelve) shows how the designs on the handle would have allowed for a firmer grip while holding the pot. For the most part, the handles I examined ranged from approximately two to five inches wide, with the smaller handle openings most likely designed for female or child wielders. Although we may never know the validity of chamber pots in the Renaissance

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<sup>7</sup> "There was a large assemblage of 131 pottery shards from the excavation of [the] floor" (Bowsher and Miller).



Figures Four through Six: Ranging from 10 ½ to 21 ½ cm in width, the larger the opening of the chamber pot, the larger the handle (usually).



Figures Seven through Nine: Sloping inward, curved and flat, the rims of these pots are always present to catch any wandering urinary stream.



Figures Ten through Twelve: The various etchings and designs of the shape of the handle suggest that functionality would have been an important consideration when designing and making these pots.

theatre, Jonson's use of them at the fair, the commercial venture of the theatre in general and the idea that Spanish theatre employed similar practices suggest that chamber pots would have had a place in Renaissance theatrical life. And, it seems likely that women would have been integral in providing these pots with this place.

Properly staged and willing to pay the appropriate fee, few women would have been ignorant of some form of theatrical gaze. Shakespeare provides us with three detailed meta-theatrical episodes of female spectatorship: Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Hippolyta (and the silent Helena and Hermia) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Miranda in *The Tempest*. In each case, these women sit alongside their male counterparts and watch the action unfold both on the stage and around them in the audience. Shakespeare tailors their responses to the onstage performances based on their knowledge of and concern for the theatrical gaze. Although Dymphna Callaghan says that "the generally naive mechanicals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* attribute naive spectatorship to women" (144), these naive mechanicals appear in more than just *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in each instance call into question the degree of passivity associated with female spectatorship.

In *Hamlet*, the action opens on an unsettled kingdom. Hamlet's father, the King, has recently died and Hamlet believes that his uncle (and now King), Claudius, has murdered his father in order to assume the throne and make a hasty marriage to his mother, Gertrude, the Queen. In order to shed light on this truth, Hamlet enlists a troupe of travelling actors to enact *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play centralized around a plot similar to (what Hamlet perceives as) the castle's recent events. He specifically asks everyone in the castle, including his uncle and mother, to the performance in order to

gauge their reactions to the plot. As the play-within opens, Gertrude is seated alongside Claudius and Hamlet positions himself next to Ophelia. *The Murder of Gonzago* opens with a dumb-show re-enacting Hamlet's imagining of the murder and works to reinforce the instability of the castle as a whole.

Unlike the majority of those in the London playhouses, those in attendance at the castle's performance are mostly royalty. Hamlet enlists Polonius "to entreat your majesties/ To hear and see the matter" (3.1.22-3) and the King responds to this invitation "with all my heart" (3.1.24). If we consider the spectating arena for a moment, it seems that the performance takes place in a great hall with seats for the entire audience. Although the castle's great hall is not a playhouse, Shakespeare still inserts multiple references to the condition of playgoing in Elizabethan London. In the footnotes accompanying this scene in the most recent edition of the Arden Shakespeare, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor suggest "it is assumed that the situation in Denmark is analogous to that in London around 1600, with the acting companies undertaking provincial tours (sometimes reluctantly) to recoup their finances" (FN. 258). The players have come from their usual posts in a fixed playhouse – they are "tragedians of the city" (2.2.292). Hamlet enquires if they are "so followed" now that they are travelling as they were "when [he] was in the city" (2.2.298). That they have a following within the city suggests the popular nature of early modern theatre; that they have taken to travelling suggests the perpetual risk of closure that accompanied commercial theatre in the early modern era. Hamlet may not make it clear to which city he refers but his comments on theatre seem to relate to play-going in early modern London:

O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. (3.2.8-12)

These groundlings and dumb-shows would have been an all too familiar occurrence in the London playhouse. Those spectators paying the penny fee to stand in the pit would have been all the more subject to participation in these dumb-shows owing to their close proximity to the stage. Wherever he may have imagined the tragedians originating, Shakespeare certainly uses them to meta-dramatically allude to – and possibly scold – the groundlings and periwig-pated fellows in attendance in the London playhouse itself.

When the “King, Queen, Polonius, Ophelia [, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern]” (SD 3.2.85) enter the spectating arena in which Hamlet and Horatio await, Hamlet instructs Horatio to “get you a place” (3.2.87), suggesting seating within the spectating arena. From the seats available, it is clear that “this scene takes place in an indoor Court setting” with “chairs, stools or benches provided for the onstage audience” (SD 3.2). It seems likely that the Claudius and Gertrude would have more fixed seats, similar to thrones perhaps, as Gertrude asks Hamlet to “come hither... sit by me” (3.2.105). Instead of choosing her own place and sitting by her son, her request for him to sit with her signals her fixed place beside her husband within the spectating arena.

Ophelia, it would seem, has more freedom of choice in her seating arrangements, though inevitably winds up seated beside Hamlet anyway. When Hamlet denies his mother’s request, he says that Ophelia is “metal more attractive” (3.2.106) and positions himself alongside her, thereby suggesting that she has already seated herself. Despite



their upsetting exchange one scene earlier, Hamlet still asks Ophelia if he “shall... lie in your lap?” (3.2.108). He then proceeds to engage her in a bawdy dialogue which she tries to ignore. It is the scene directly preceding the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* in which Hamlet famously tells Ophelia to “get thee to a nunnery” five times (3.1.120, 128-9, 136, 139, 148) and denies her his love. While Polonius (Ophelia’s father) and Claudius witness the exchange from “*behind an arras*” (SD 3.1.54), Hamlet asks “are you honest?” and “are you fair?” (3.1.102-4). He feigns indifference towards her and tells her “I loved you not” (3.1.118), while up until this point in the plot he has been romantically pursuing her. His abrupt change of heart (a product of his recent madness) leads Hamlet to curse Ophelia’s reputation – “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as/ snow, thou shalt not escape calumny” (3.1.125-6).

Interestingly, Ophelia remains very quiet during his rebuking. Aside from admitting to being “the more deceived” (3.1.119), until he exits the scene she only remarks “*aside*,” wishing “heavenly powers restore him” (3.1.140). She hides her actual emotional response behind these asides and does not engage him at all throughout the dialogue. Once Hamlet leaves, though, she admits to being “most deject and wretched” (3.1.154) and cries out “O woe is me/ T’have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (3.1.159-60). Her reactions, no longer restricted by Hamlet’s presence, show her true feelings on the matter. Her brief emotional outburst – in which she considers “what a noble mind is here o’erthrown” (3.1.149) – is interrupted when “*King and Polonius step forward from behind the arras*” (SD 3.1.160). At this point, once in the direct presence of her father and the King and therefore a domestic male gaze, she comments no more on

the situation and seems to compose herself. She does not have any more lines until the next scene.

While “some hours may have elapsed” (FN 3.2) between this rebuking and the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Ophelia seems much more ready to deal with Hamlet’s cruel demeanour as a spectator, showing that she is not as passive before the theatrical gaze, where there is at least one other woman in attendance, as she has been before the domestic gaze. After the dumb-show, in which “*the [Players as] a king and a queen*” (SD 3.2.128) silently enact the plot of the murder of Gonzago, Ophelia is the first to react to the play’s content.

Ophelia:       What means this, my lord?

Hamlet:       Marry, this munching mallico! It means mischief.

Ophelia:       Belike this show imports the argument of the play. (3.2.129)

Her voiced concern for the play’s intended content reflects her role as an active spectator. While just one scene earlier, she may have cloaked her emotional response in front of Hamlet’s “unmatched form and stature of blown youth” (3.1.158), she now remarks on his offensive behaviour, saying “you are naught, you are naught” (3.2.140). When he persists on chronicling the play’s plot, she tells him that “you are as good as a chorus, my lord” (3.2.238). As well as being the first to speak following the dumb-show, she is also the first to notice that “the King rises” (3.2.258) after witnessing Lucianus’s poisoning of the player King. Shakespeare situates Ophelia’s focus on multiple points within the spectating realm in order to show her participation in and acknowledgment of the theatrical gaze. By calling attention to Hamlet’s misbehaviour and to the King rising,

Shakespeare shows Ophelia as an active spectator and one that is not afraid to speak before the theatrical gaze – unlike Gertrude, the more regal spectator of the two.

It is much harder to locate Gertrude's focus throughout the play as she very minimally responds. As the play unfolds and its subtextual meaning surfaces, Gertrude does not say a word until Hamlet asks her, "Madam, how like you this play?" (3.2.223). However she may be reacting throughout this scene, Shakespeare does not script these reactions into the play's dialogue or stage directions. Whether or not she cloaks her reactions during the performance is therefore is rather contentious. We do see some recognition of her alignment with the Player Queen when Gertrude responds that "the lady doth protest too much, methinks" (3.2.224) but her return to silence after this one statement leaves little to go on regarding her focus throughout the rest of the play. From her exit, however, it would seem she participates in the multiple gazes occurring in the spectating arena by focusing on Claudius's response to the performance as well as the play itself. She quips "How fares my lord?" (3.2.359) once Ophelia remarks that the King has risen and quickly follows Claudius out of the arena. The play may be "the thing/ Wherein [Hamlet'll] catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.539-40) but from her limited reactions, it would appear Hamlet has caught his mother's conscience, as well. From Gertrude's minimal yet nominal response we know that she understands Hamlet's motives behind the play and is aware of the theatrical gaze, even though she refuses to become a spectacle within it. In this meta-theatrical episode, Shakespeare signals that the more regal the female spectator, the more goes into controlling her outward comportment within the playhouse.

While Shakespeare does not show any female spectators in *Hamlet* using their cloaks or fabric to conceal their embodiment, we do see some metaphoric cloaking in personal practice. Firstly, there is Gertrude's lack of response throughout the play combined with her clear understanding of the play's intended content. Secondly, there is Ophelia's refusal to engage in Hamlet's bawdy discourse yet her willingness to call attention to his motives regarding the play-within. If Gertrude were to publically engage her son further on the play's content, she would run the risk of exposing the truth surrounding her late husband's death. If Ophelia were to "indicate that she understands *lie in your lap* in a sexual sense" (FN 3.2.109-10), then Hamlet's attempts at getting a rise from her might intensify all the more. As we have seen, Ophelia is upset in the scene prior to the play, is conscious of the theatrical gaze within the spectating arena and participates in the gaze through her multiple points of focus throughout the play. She therefore cloaks her true reactions to Hamlet's sexual behaviour in an effort to escape further erotic scrutiny while in the spectating realm. Shakespeare's lack of indication on their true feelings reflects his desire to represent either the actual naiveté of female spectatorship or the female's staged passivity within the spectating arena. In both cases, we see how the female spectators in *Hamlet* tailor their reactions within the theatre to avoid being the objects of more scrutiny than they already are.

Another of Shakespeare's regal female spectators, (and she who sparks Callaghan's note of the "naive mechanicals" of Shakespeare's female spectatorship), is Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the final scene's performance of *Pyramus and Thisby*, the newlyweds Hippolyta and Theseus, (not to mention Hermia and Demetrius, Helena and Lysander) watch a masque celebrating their union(s). Although

most of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place outdoors, it is clear from Snout, Bottom and Quince that the masque's performance takes place indoors. When these three characters – a tinker, a weaver and a carpenter respectively – are discussing the logistics behind their evening-masque performance, Bottom suggests that for moonlight, they should “leave a casement of the great/ chamber window, where [they] play, open” (3.1.52-3). Like the playing arena in *Hamlet*, the performance takes place indoors in a planned spectating arena.

Although the arena may be planned and the play somewhat rehearsed, the play still becomes something of an impromptu affair. Snout and the other players enter the plot as early as act two but their preparation of the play has little effect on whether or not Theseus will choose to hear it. After “*Theseus, Hippolyta, and Philostrate (with Lords and Attendants)*” (5.1.0) enter the performance arena in the final scene, Theseus asks Philostrate “what masques, what dances shall we have,/ To wear away this long age of three hours/ Between our aftersupper and bedtime?” (5.1.32-4). Having used Snug to explain that “the duke is coming from the temple, and/ there is two or three lords and ladies *more married*” (4.2.15-6, my own italics), Shakespeare reveals that Theseus's and Hippolyta's wedding has already taken place offstage by this point in the plot. The performance that follows is therefore meant as a post-wedding celebration.

During Theseus's and Philostrate's exchange over Theseus's choice of entertainment, Hippolyta's voice is not heard once. Theseus takes it upon himself to decide how they “shall... beguile/ The lazy time” (5.1.40-1) and it is only once Philostrate has gone “*to summon the players*” (5.1.84) that she gives her opinion. She notes that she “[loves] not to see wretchedness o'ercharged” (5.1.85), a curious line that seems to signal

her distaste for terrible acting. Even once the play has begun she comments that “this is the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (5.1.209). Unimpressed with Prologue, she calls him “a child/ on a recorder – a sound, but not in government” (5.1.122-3). As Philostrate has repeatedly told Theseus that the play “is not for you” (5.1.78), Hippolyta’s claim that the actors “can do nothing in this kind” (5.1.88) shows her initial disdain for the performance. That Hippolyta takes such an interest in voicing her opinion only once the masque has been chosen signals who holds the power within this theatrical domain.

Shakespeare does grant Hippolyta a voice once the performance has been chosen but her voice is much more nuanced than naive. Hermia and Helena (and the anonymous female attendants) watch silently throughout the performance but Hippolyta’s voices her reactions numerous times, these reactions being centred mostly around the character of the Moon in *Pyramus and Thisby*. She admits to being “awearry of this moon. Would he would change!” (5.1.246). While this could be taken as no more than a particular dislike for a character, the play’s performance on the night of her wedding reflects her heightened concern for the Moon as a newlywed female. Once Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta now has a heightened sensibility about the moon’s positioning which is showcased in five short lines from the exchange between her and Theseus which opens the play:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,  
Four nights will quickly dream away the time,  
And then the moon, like to a silver bow  
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities. (1.1.7-11)

That the moon will behold their wedding night suggests something more than providing moonlight by which to consummate the union. It is initially Theseus who bemoans “how slow/ This old moon wanes!” (1.1.3-4) but Hippolyta’s concern for the positioning of the moon seems to signal her concern for her menstrual embodiment.

Referred to as a woman’s “menses,” “menstruals” and “monthly purgations” throughout seventeenth-century midwifery tracts<sup>8</sup>, the moon figures prominently in both the etymology of these words as well as the cyclical nature of menstruation. As “the Latin derivation of the word ‘menstruation’ is ‘moon change’” (Mulvey-Roberts 152), it is interesting to consider Hippolyta’s reaction once “*enter Lion and Moonshine*” (S.D. 5.1.209-10). No longer awary of this moon, she delivers praise: “Well shone, Moon. Truly, the moon shines/ with a good grace” (5.1.262-3). Her initial disdain for the Moon’s performance is by the end of the play replaced with a participatory inquisition: “How chance Moonshine is gone before Thisby comes back/ and finds her lover?” (5.1.293-4). Although one could simply gloss this as her concern for the heroine’s night visibility, considering the frequency with which Hippolyta addresses the moon in concordance with the limited amount of lines she receives, Hippolyta seems more concerned with the positioning of the moon than anything else – a concern which cannot help but call attention to her own menstrual and virginal embodiment.

Hippolyta’s shift in reactions occurs at the point in the play-within which concerns a number of issues relating to female embodiment: moons, cloaks, and blood. As the moon changes, Thisby drops her mantle (or cloak) and later Pyramus discovers this cloak with blood upon it. In the following exchange, we see Hippolyta’s reactions

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle’s 1697 midwifery tract, *Aristotle’s Master-Piece compleated in two parts: the first containing the Secrets of Generation... The second part, being a Private Looking-Glass for the Female Sex, etc.*, uses all three to refer to menstruation: “menses” (3), “menstruals” (77), and “monthly purgations” (5).

shift when Thisby drops this “protective garment or blanket... [this] loose sleeveless cloak” (*OED*):

Thisby: This is old Ninny’s tomb. Where is my love?

Lion: [*roaring*] O!

Demetrius: Well roared, Lion. [*Thisby runs off, dropping her mantle.*]

Theseus: Well run, Thisby.

Hippolyta: Well shone, Moon. Truly, the moon shines with a good grace.

[*The Lion worries Thisby’s mantle.*] (5.1.246-50)

Read on the surface, this scene appears to be nothing more than a rising incident in a performance that will shortly climax with two successive suicides. The Lion interrupts what would have otherwise been a romantic encounter, leading to much confusion on account of the “mantle good,/ What, stained with blood?” (5.1.264-5). Read more carefully, however, there are problems associated with this bloody mantle. One issue is the blood’s origin: from whence does this blood arise? Is it Thisby’s or someone else’s? At no point in the above exchange does it suggest that the Lion successfully bites Thisby – only that she “runs off.” Therefore, the blood must either be pre-existing or transferred from the Lion’s “bloody mouth” (5.1.142) during the worrying.

If we consider the image of the bloody mouth, mentioned first in the Prologue, then this image would seem to account for the mantle acquiring its bloody status. Through simple transference, whatever blood was on the Lion’s mouth when he entered the stage becomes that which Pyramus discovers shortly thereafter on Thisby’s mantle. This continues with Pyramus’s assumption that the “lion vile hath here deflowered my dear” (5.1.274), alluding not only menstrual blood, but also to the blood associated with



the female loss of virginity. If we consider the Lion's bloody mouth as a physical stand-in for a vagina – as apart from the Moon, who merely signifies Hippolyta's menstrual concerns – then it is no surprise that the Lion disappears before Pyramus is there to witness him. I have already shown the ways in which early modern menstrual embodiment belonged to a female-female sphere and Pyramus's entrance some four lines after the Lion's exit represents the cloaking, or in this case, removal of female embodiment from the male gaze.

If we take the Lion out of the equation, though, we can consider the blood a tangible sign of Thisby's monthly purgations. If the position of the moon is such that Thisby has started menstruating en route to Ninny's tomb, this stained fabric shows that Thisby may have menstrually leaked not only onto her clothes but also onto the outermost of her various layers of fabric – the “clean linen” (4.2.37) to which Bottom refers before the masque begins. Both readings fix the vagina as a site of purgation: either the Lion's mouth, as a stand-in for vaginal bleeding, transfers the blood onto her cloak or Thisby is responsible for not paying enough attention to her monthly cycle. Nothing suggests that she is physically harmed.

Other than the question of the blood's origin, a second problem with this mantle is that if Pyramus enters after the Lion's exit (as he does some four lines later) how does he know that a lion is the culprit behind the mantle's blood? Pyramus initially hopes to use the Moon's “glittering gleams,/ ... to take of truest Thisby sight” (5.1.256-7) but soon laments the “dreadful dole” (5.1.260) that the moonlight visibility affords him. He acknowledges Thisby's ownership of the blood-stained fabric when he calls it “*thy* mantle good” (5.1.278) which suggests that he would have seen Thisby's mantle on

another occasion and could therefore recognize it as hers. All of this explains nothing of the blood but his assumption that the “lion vile hath here deflowered” (5.1.287) Thisby causes him to align this lion with the sexual embodiment of Thisby’s body: “O, wherefore, Nature, didst thou lions frame?” (5.1.286). Following this, it seems that Pyramus’s ensuing death stems from the visibility of this blood. He becomes so distraught that he “*stabs himself*” through “that left pap/ Where heart doth hop” (5.1.93-5). By situating Hippolyta, the once-Queen of the Amazons, within the audience witnessing this exchange, Shakespeare allows her to fret over the masque’s more embodied concerns. She seems to cloak her own menstrual and virginal concerns with concern for the Moon’s performance, allowing her to publically muse on her own embodiment within the theatrical domain.

While Shakespeare does not show Hippolyta seeking out the other women’s aid in any effort to cloak embodiment within the theatrical domain, the “ladies” of the audience are certainly a discernable group from the beginning. When the players first ponder the logistics of performing *Pyramus and Thisby*, they worry about the intended female spectatorship of the play. On the subject of having a lion as a character, the players note that should he roar too loudly, he “would fright the duchess/ and the ladies,... they would shriek” (1.2.68-70) and that “a lion among ladies is a most dreadful/ thing” (3.1.28-9). This concern for the “ladies” causes the players to insert a secondary prologue to reiterate the performed – and therefore pretend – nature of the play. The Lion addresses the ladies upon his entrance to the playing scene:

You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear

The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,

May now perchance both quake and tremble here,

When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar. (5.1.217-20)

By worrying that the female spectators will be unable to separate spectacle from reality, the players assume the women are naive spectators. The women in the audience are externally grouped together as a particular type of spectator and patronized accordingly. It seems unlikely that they would have actually been scared by the Lion as disdain rather than fear seems to be the reaction accompanying at least Hippolyta's spectatorial experience. Overall, from this depiction of a female spectator, we see how Hippolyta sits beside Theseus, is concerned with the play's menstrual and erotic undertones and is more disgusted than scared by anything the play has to offer. We may not see her actively cloaking her own embodiment within the theatrical domain but by publically musing on the position of the moon on her own wedding night, she does cloak her menstrual concerns with concern for the Moon's performance.

Perhaps the briefest portrayal Shakespeare gives us of a regal spectator is that of Miranda in *The Tempest*. Having grown up on an island and having never seen another woman, her knowledge of and participation in any female-female discourse is unlikely. While she is not a queen or a duchess like Gertrude and Hippolyta, she is in many ways that which closest resembles female royalty on Prospero's island. Prospero is listed as the "right duke of Milan" in the dramatis personae and his prolonged presence on the island has made him a regal figure on this shipwrecked island, as well. Having lived there for twelve years – after Antonio's usurpation of Prospero's throne – Miranda can be considered a type of princess, or at least a duke's daughter, upon the island. When she settles alongside Ferdinand "on this grass-plot" (4.1.73) to watch the masque, like

Gertrude and Hippolyta, she sits alongside her husband (to-be). Prospero bids his spirits perform the masque following his impending-father-in-law speech:

Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition  
Worthily purchas'd, take my daughter: but  
If thou dost break her virgin-knot before  
All sanctimonious ceremonies may  
With full and holy rite be minister'd,  
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall  
To make this contract grow; but barren hate,  
Sour-ey'd disdain and discord shall bestrew  
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly  
That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed,  
As Hymen's lamps shall light you. (4.1.13-23)

Considering the early modern mindset of labelling women as property, it is unsurprising that Prospero should consider Miranda in terms of a “gift,” “worthily purchas'd” and a “contract.” Considering the anxiety surrounding the early modern regal body and the efforts that went into keeping its bodily thresholds from the public eye, it is even less surprising that Prospero should threaten Ferdinand with “barren hate” and “weeds so loathly” should he break her “virgin-knot.” And, considering the common seventeenth-century association between marital engagements and masques, Prospero's decision to celebrate their union with a masque is surprising owing only to the limited number of residents – and therefore actors – on the island.

In a masque involving Iris, Ceres and Juno, Prospero “[bestows] upon the eyes of this young couple/ some vanity of mine Art” (4.1.40-1). These three figures, as well as Venus, Cupid and Hymen, are common to seventeenth-century wedding masques<sup>9</sup> and often appear when there is “a contract of true love to celebrate” (4.1.84). Prospero’s use of the three goddesses offers Miranda a chance to participate in female-female discourse before her wedding night. Earlier in the play, Miranda admits to not knowing “one of my sex; no woman’s face remember,/ save, from my glass, mine own” (3.1.49-50). Without this female-female discourse through which to learn about and regulate her body, she is aware of “the jewel in [her] dower” (3.1.54) but knows little how to focus it. When she first sees Ferdinand, she considers him “a thing divine” (1.2.421) and quickly accepts his hand in marriage, unaware of the sexual embodiment accompanying marriage.

Her father is willing to accept the union but not without reminding them both of them that Miranda must retain her virginity until their wedding night. Prospero uses the masque with these three notorious goddesses (Iris, Juno and Ceres) as an extension of the earlier conditions regarding Miranda’s body and the impending marriage: “no bed-right shall be paid/ Till Hymen’s torch be lighted” (4.1.106-7). The three goddesses stand in for the missing link of Miranda’s pre-married life: they allow her to participate in this female sphere, however momentarily. While they may not tell her of the pain associated with the loss of her virginity, Iris, Juno and Ceres nonetheless grant Miranda a chance to experience this female-female discourse before her wedding night. Ceres, Iris and Juno reiterate those conditions as laid out by Prospero earlier and “celebrate/ a contract of new

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<sup>9</sup> In Book Three of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), Britomart witnesses a type of masque performance in Busirane’s castle: watching all from a “secret shade” (3.12.xxvii), she sees Cupid and his train enter and exit in a parade of song. In Sir John Vanbrugh’s 1696 *The Relapse*, the masque performed at the end of the play is to celebrate Hoyden and Lord Foppington’s (as of yet unconsummated) marriage and features a “*dialogue between Cupid and Hymen*” (5.5.105).

love” (4.1.132-3). Through this, Miranda gains support from the female sphere she has been denied throughout her life.

At the beginning of the performance, Prospero commands the spirits to appear and bids Miranda and Ferdinand “no tongue! all eyes! be silent” (4.1.59). Miranda enters the scene alongside her father and husband-to-be and remains silent throughout their exchange on the conditions of her body. She continues silently throughout the play-within in a manner which very much complicates an extended close reading of her actions. From her few reactions, though, we do know that her play-going experience is different from that of Gertrude and Hippolyta’s in that she is the lone female spectator of the show, the performance is taking place outdoors – “*before Prospero’s cell*” (4.1.0), upon “this short-grass’d green” (4.1.83) – and she is not scripted as having any fixed reaction to the performance. Like both of the other women, however, she does sit rather conventionally alongside her male counterpart. And, like Gertrude, her only reaction to the play is her response to her fiancé’s query about her father:

Fer: This is strange: your father’s in some passion  
That works him strongly.

Mir: Never till this day  
Saw I him touch’d with anger, so distemper’d. (4.1.143-5)

Prospero simply “*starts suddenly*” on account of the plot “the beast Caliban and his confederates/ [have] against my life” (4.1.140-1) and Miranda’s reaction to this instead of the performance is noteworthy. While she may simply be obeying Prospero’s command of “no tongue,” that Shakespeare depicts her as more concerned for her father than the play suggests her increased passivity as a female spectator. Whether or not she is

actually passive or merely feigning this passivity, the lack of other women in the audience signal that Miranda is without this support network and therefore unable to speak freely about the play-within.

Taken together, Shakespeare's female spectators exhibit certain key trends: they are higher-class women, they sit alongside their male counterparts during the performances and they are conscious of the gaze within the theatrical realm, tailoring their responses accordingly. Although they may not extensively engage with the other female spectators within their individual spectating arenas (as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Shakespeare creates female spectators who manage the degree of passivity associated with their spectatorship in terms of the audience around them. Gertrude and Ophelia converse only briefly, Hippolyta does not engage Hermia and Helena at all, and Miranda merely listens to the goddesses perform. Nevertheless, in each instance the female spectators are shaped by their alignment with each other in the theatre. They may not cloak their bodies with each other's aid but Shakespeare certainly depicts them as conscious of how to control their outward comportment within the theatre and cloak their emotions, whenever necessary.

Jonson also shows the use of this female-female discourse in the theatre but refreshingly, he breaks with Shakespeare's choice of spectator and seating arrangements. In *The Staple of News*, he uses non-regal female spectators and seats them alongside one another in a proper playhouse. This episode is very different from Shakespeare's meta-theatrical episodes in that Jonson's play is set in contemporary Renaissance London and reflects a much wider assortment of playgoers. *The Staple of News* itself is the performance in question and the only scripted spectators are the four gossips who arrive

prior to the play's commencement. Just as Jonson uses the chamber-pot rental in *Bartholomew Fair* to signal the cloaking of women's embodiment in public space, he uses the four gossips as spectators to signal the centrality of the female body to the theatre. Dymphna Callaghan notes that

in the [early modern] playhouse... women and, notably, always women of some social standing, far from being merely passive consumers of events portrayed before them, *produce* affect to such an excessive extent that they themselves become spectacles to rival the plays. (142)

Jonson represents this produced affect by situating four gossips infamous for this female-female discourse as the main spectacle, instead of the usual peripheral one.

The Gossips Tattle, Censure, Expectation and Mirth enter the stage second only to Prologue in the play's Induction and bully their way onstage. Jonson's gossips are a unique breed of spectator in that Jonson scripts them into the play, yet leaves them external to the actual plot. They are also unique in that they are gossips, those women perhaps most intimately and socially related to the female body, and they are situated directly onstage. Mirth acknowledges their right to sit onstage when she explains that "we are persons of quality" (Induction 8) and central to everyone's presence in the playhouse through their roles in childbirth more generally. Gail Kern Paster explains how in the early modern era, the term 'gossip' came to mean a number of things:

Etymologically derived from the linking of 'God' and 'syb' (kin), 'gossip' referred to godparent or baptismal sponsor, or to the spiritual bond of that relationship. It also signified a same-sex friendship, at first among both men and women and later primarily between women. 'Gossip' also referred to the female



intimates who attended childbirth (and the ‘gossips’ cup’ to the drinking that celebrated such an event). And finally, it was used in the familiar sense of malicious or idle chatter, or the person, usually female, who indulged in it. (“Female” 218)

Each of these definitions denotes an intimate relationship: godparenting can be considered very intimate in terms of presence during baptismal rites; same-sex friendship is based on some (at least) abstract notion of like-sexed bodies being more naturally inclined to friendship; the women in attendance during childbirth would have maintained the physical thresholds of the female labouring body; and the malicious chatter is taken up as “a standard target in pamphlets, ballads and plays” on account of women’s preoccupation “with each other at the expense of home and husband” (“Female” 218). It seems likely, then, that Jonson uses gossips as spectators to call attention to the intimacy associated with each of these posts.

While there are gossips onstage throughout this period, (Paulina attends to Hermione’s childbirth in *The Winter’s Tale*; the Nurse attends to Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*), Jonson uses gossips as spectators to highlight their underrepresentation within the theatre itself. Just as “childbirth is especially invisible in dramatic representation” (Paster “Body” 163), women involved in childbirth were a reality within the playhouse even if they were usually less central to the onstage performance. We see Prologue’s concern for their onstage positioning when he worries “what will the noblemen think... to see you seat on the bench thus?” (Induction 15-6). Gossip Mirth responds to Prologue that the noblemen in the audience “had mothers, as we had, and these mothers had gossips (if their children were christen’d) as we are, and such as had a longing to see plays and sit

upon them, as we do” (Induction 17-20). Mirth argues that although hers and the other gossips’ role in childbirth is often hidden from the domestic gaze, they are nonetheless integral in the production of spectators at large. Each child delivered becomes one more future spectator.

Onstage, the gossips are at the centre of the theatrical gaze. Jonson positions them onstage to show just how rarely centralized these women actually were in the theatre. The women’s insistence on sitting on the stage reflects their conscious acknowledgment of the theatrical gaze. Mirth says that they are “women of fashion... [who] come to see and to be seen” (Induction 9) and from this we see their awareness of the multiplicity of intersecting gazes within the theatrical domain.

Pamela Brown proposes that “Jonson casts [the gossips] as the prime producers and consumers of news and rumors” (65) in order to contrast the mostly male producers and consumers of news within the plot of *The Staple of News*, the play that both the staged gossips and the audience at large are there to watch. *The Staple of News* pivots around the creation of a newspaper entitled “The Staple” and the multiple – yet entirely male – voices that go into the creation of early modern printed news. Although the play does provide female characters (replete, I should add, with an army of waiting women for the Infanta Pecunia), Jonson does not show these women’s relationships as they affect the production of news. But, by putting the gossips onstage and external to the plot, he makes “them sharp-eyed judges of the Staple, which commodifies word of mouth by printing it” (Brown, Pamela 65). Instead of hiding their reactions from the audience’s focus (or, indeed, cloaking them), Jonson puts the gossips onstage to show female-female discourse’s potential for commenting upon the male-driven world of early modern news –

not to mention early modern dramatic production. Although spectators often sat onstage, Prologue's attempted refusal of the women – “for your own sake, not ours” (Induction 1) – shows that their position there is not entirely permissible. He may quickly give in and demand “bring a form here” (Induction 14) so that they may be seated but his initial hesitation speaks volumes on the place of the female spectator within the theatre.

While we cannot consider all female-female discourse as gossip in the early modern era, Jonson specifically singles out gossip to show its potential for female empowerment within the theatrical domain. Kathleen Brown posits that “rooted in domestic sociability... gossip was perhaps the closest thing to a female public” (89). Paster reminds us that this gossip became threatening to the masculine domain in that it “threatened hierarchy by reinforcing horizontal alliances” (“Female” 218). Although it may never be clear to what extent female horizontal alliances threatened within the theatre, their use for the female spectator cannot be discounted. These “*four gentlewomen lady-like attired*” (SD Induction) make their occupation known within the opening two lines of the play – “come, gossip, be not asham'd” (Induction 2). In doing so, Jonson calls attention to the shame often associated with their employment and the peripheral positioning of female embodiment at large. Jonson's four gossips may not interact with any aspect of the play other than Prologue but from their insistence on “some stools here... o'the stage” (Induction 6-8), we see how they are able to call upon these horizontal alliances in order to empower their own situations as spectators and sit exactly where they choose.

Once these women have chosen their seats, they frequently focus on two aspects throughout the performance: current news and fashion. Tattle tells Prologue to “look

your news be fresh” and threatens that she will be able to recognize “if they be stale or fly-blown, quickly” (Induction 24-5). From this, Jonson suggests that gossips are somehow more privy to new information and will therefore be able to recognize stale news much more quickly than most. When Censure still considers the play’s news as “monstrous, scurvy, and stale!” (III. Intermean 14), Jonson makes clear that the newness of the news in the play is no competition for the newness achievable through female-female discourse.

That they are lady-like attired suggests their awareness of their own fashioning within the Renaissance playhouse. Censure is seemingly the most focused on the play’s fashion as it is she who responds “yes” to Prologue when he asks if the gossips have “come to see who wears the new suit today, whose clothes are best penn’d whatever the part be” (Induction 38-9). By the fourth and final Intermean – the between-act dialogue between the gossips – Censure is still shown as piqued by the style of the characters onstage: “I protest, I was in love with Master Fitton. He did wear all he had, from the hatband to the shoe-tie” (IV. Intermean 31-3). When Tattle says that she “cannot abide that nasty fellow, the beggar” and wishes that “he had been a court-beggar in good clothes, a beggar in velvet” (I. Intermean 10-11), Jonson aligns fashion with the supposed type of superficiality, or again, naiveté, of female spectatorship.

Although Jonson may be somewhat forward in his positioning of women onstage as well as his choice of female spectators, he still associates female spectatorship with certain pejorative connotations. The women seem disappointed that there is “neither devil nor fool in this play” (II. Intermean 2). Mirth asks the others “how like you the Vice i’ the play?” (II. Intermean 5-6) and seems disgusted with the new way of playing.

She comments how those characters most closely resembling allegorical figures of vice “are [now] attir’d like men and women o’ the time, the Vices, male and female!” (II. Intermean 16-7). Here, Jonson harkens back to an age wherein more stock, allegorical caricatures were the norm – as was the tradition of much late-fifteenth, early-sixteenth-century drama. Once again, he aligns female spectatorship with naivete. Although the gossips may have the capacity to produce a very current female-female discourse, their expectations of the play’s content reflects much older play-going traditions. These expectations also tap into the network of anxiety men held regarding this female-female discourse. Just as “the men excluded from the birthing room imagined the women telling jokes about sex, belittling men’s performances and reputations” (Fissell 70), Jonson imagines his gossips as interested in little other than vice, fashion and the newness of news. His gossips may be a rarity upon the stage but they are still shown as somewhat naive, or certainly superficial. Nonetheless, his positioning of them onstage with each other reflects how women’s sociability in the theatre would have been useful to female spectators for controlling their own positioning and visibility within the theatrical gaze.

Taken together, the meta-theatrical episodes under examination in this chapter suggest that the more female spectators present together in the Renaissance theatre, the greater the ease of each female spectator’s play-going experience. From Miranda’s lone and silent spectatorship to the four gossips who leverage their solidarity as a group of women to experience the performance exactly the way they want, Jonson and Shakespeare’s episodes show that it was safer for the female spectator to outwardly react to the performance if she was not alone. Even the large number of silent women present for the performance of *Pyramus and Thisby* allow Hippolyta to repeatedly muse about

her sexual embodiment, albeit disguised with concern for the Moon. From this, we can see how Renaissance women depended on each other for greater spectatorial ease and would have found less need to cloak their emotional responses to the performance if they were not alone.

One problem that comes with any dependent relationship, though, is a sense of vulnerability – a feeling of helplessness when those other people are not there. This helplessness may seem a far cry from the vulnerable female restroom experience I discuss in the introduction but the Renaissance woman's dependence on other women in the playhouse began to put her in a vulnerable position before her fellow female spectators. Throughout the next two chapters I will show that as the century progresses, female spectators learn how to effectively use one another in different ways to resist the theatrical gaze and perform before it. I will also show how women's growing dependency on each other in the playhouse becomes problematic for many women. Already conscious of the overall theatrical gaze, the female spectator had to carefully choose how and when she showed her vulnerability to the people who were supposedly there to help her the most – and how to deal with the consequences when she chose incorrectly.

## Chapter Two – Talking Back: Voicing the Female Spectator in Caroline Drama

The years leading up to and directly following the Commonwealth were years rife with political, social and theatrical unrest. The year 1642 saw the closure of all public theatres in London but the turmoil culminating in these closures had begun much earlier in the century. While chapter one centred on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, this chapter looks at the ten years pre- and post- Cromwell's reign, at the period roughly corresponding with Caroline drama. During this time the theatre was as changing as the state: from the abolition of the public theatres and the monarchy to women appearing more and more on the stage, the years bracketed by James Shirley's 1633 *The Bird in a Cage* and Margaret Cavendish's 1668 *The Convent of Pleasure* were a time of much unrest in English history. We see this unrest in the theatre manifest in the closure of almost all (as well as the dismantling of many) public theatres within London's jurisdiction. These closures were in part owing to the many Puritan anti-theatricalist tracts circulating during this time and Cromwell's support of these anti-theatrical opinions. Although it was this same type of tract against the theatre that had earlier landed William Prynne in prison for his 1633 publication of *Histriomastix*, by the time of Cromwell's ascension to power, these opinions were responsible for the closure of the London playhouses up until the Restoration in 1660.

In chapter one I examined physical and metaphoric cloaking techniques that allowed women to assume agency over their position within Renaissance public playhouses. This chapter uses two meta-theatrical episodes to show how female sociability afforded women agency within the more private theatrical venues of the mid-seventeenth century. As women's involvement in the theatre grew throughout this

period, there was also a rise in the more ‘private’ forms of drama such as closet drama and court theatre. We see how these more private theatrical forms slowly became tools for women in patriarchal resistance and Shirley and Cavendish meta-theatrically exhibit this reality in their respective works. Although women were not permitted on the English public stage until the Restoration, Shirley and Cavendish provide two meta-theatrical examples that show female spectators using one another to take to the private stage. Both plays exhibit all-female spheres and show theatre within these gynosomal spheres as a means of resisting the patriarchal networks around them. In *The Bird in a Cage*, Shirley has Eugenia and her ladies-in-waiting use theatre to protest their situation by staging a play that closely resembles, or mimics, their imprisoned situation. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Lady Happy and the Prince(ss) are able to watch a play within the all-female convent that deals exclusively with the hardships of marriage and childbirth – childbirth being a topic that was not often seen on any actual London public stage. In both cases, these all-female theatrical spheres show how female spectatorship allowed for patriarchal resistance the more women were involved. More importantly, both plays show the pitfalls of female spectatorship as the voiced female spectator takes to the stage. While the female spectator may have been able to assume authority over her position in the playhouse through her participation in female-female discourse, both Shirley and Cavendish show that once she appeared and spoke onstage, her authority was thwarted.

Although these two playwrights were writing in entirely different political moments, with Cavendish categorized as a Restoration playwright in most critical accounts, I have included her in this chapter on mid-century private theatre as Cavendish was writing on the cusp of the restored monarchy and seemingly not for the public stage.



The female spectators exhibited in *The Bird in a Cage* and *The Convent of Pleasure* reinforce the idea that women can only subvert the theatrical gaze if they keep themselves off the stage. While the “birth” of the English actress “officially” takes place in the Restoration, women did participate onstage before this time. Queen Anne of Denmark during her 1603 to 1619 reign was a thorough supporter of and participant in the masques at court, even if she was only a silent participant.<sup>10</sup> Travelling French acting troupes employing women appeared on the London stage as early as 1629.<sup>11</sup> Queen Henrietta Maria and her ladies-in-waiting were vehement supporters and participants in many masques at court and as Julie Sanders suggests, even inspired numerous rivals of salon theatrical culture.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, while the English actress may have a close association with the reopening of the public theatres in 1660, this is not to suggest that Restoration actresses were the first women to appear onstage.

As the monarchs reigning in the years leading up to the Commonwealth were avid supporters of masques and theatre, court masques became a very popular form of private drama. In their exploration of “performable” female drama of the mid-seventeenth century, Alison Findlay, Gweno Williams and Stephanie J. Hodgson-Wright note how

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<sup>10</sup> Julie Sanders notes how Anne’s participation in the masques “had been, of necessity, silent” (*Caroline* 31). Her muted participation in court masques shows how this particular monarch allowed herself to be seen but not heard within the drama. This also corresponds with the custom of having regal participants in the masques but not having them voice their own parts. As one went to *hear* rather than *see* a play throughout the seventeenth century, there is the suggestion that so long as the Queen did not voice any part within the drama, she remained untainted in terms of dramatic performance.

<sup>11</sup> Sanders adds that this performance occurred at the Blackfriars theatre (*Caroline* 35).

<sup>12</sup> In “Caroline Salon Culture and Female Agency: The Countess of Carlisle, Henrietta Maria, and Public Theatre,” Sanders shows how the Queen’s fervent participation in dramatic performance inspired many so-called “female rivals and competitors” (450). She pays particular attention to one Lucy Percy Hay, the Countess of Carlisle who “cultivated a salon culture in which she was the focus of attention” (453) yet also makes reference to other such female dramatic enthusiasts such as “Elizabeth Cecil, Lady Hatton; Lady Mary Villiers, Duchess of Lennox; and Frances Weston, Countess of Portland” (464) and implores further research into this area.

“court masques and so-called private theatricals in great houses provided two ready-made dramatic modes in which royal or aristocratic women could participate as presenters as well as spectators” (131). The shift in women on the stage during this era, then, is not exactly that more and more women were appearing onstage but instead that the female spectator was also appearing onstage – especially within the dramas themselves. It was this increase in her appearance onstage that allowed spectatorship and acting to become not oppositional modes of participation in dramatic production but instead two modes working together for women’s greater dramatic involvement. Unlike Jonson’s metatheatrical gossips and Shakespeare’s dramatic female spectators (who all would have been played by boys dressed as women), those noble female constituents of the late Renaissance audience started to slowly – but surely – take over the women’s parts and play themselves in certain private theatrical situations.

As many critics dealing with Caroline drama tend to do – and especially those dealing with the two aforementioned playwrights – it helps to explore the link between Prynne, Shirley, Cavendish and the regal female spectator that united them all: Queen Henrietta Maria. Despite the thirty-five years between the two play’s publications, both Shirley and Cavendish were closely connected to Queen Henrietta Maria and knew her passion for the theatre. Judith Peacock notes that once Cavendish “became Lady in Waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria at Oxford in 1643, she would have become part of a very active theatrical coterie” (88); likewise, Rebecca D’Monté notes that Cavendish’s “role as maid of honour to Henrietta Maria afforded her opportunities to see the Queen and her attendants take part in a number of court entertainments, as well as visit public playhouses” (119). More than her connection to the Queen, Julie Sanders has also noted

her close association with James Shirley, calling Shirley a “part of the entourage of [the Cavendish’s] theatrical family and household” (“Woman” 294). That both playwrights worked so closely with the Queen – and even with each other – makes it no surprise that their all-female theatrics are intimately linked to regal spectatorship and performance and are therefore often examined side by side in many critical accounts.<sup>13</sup>

With the ascension of Charles to the throne and his marriage to Henrietta Maria of France in 1625, the regal female spectator found her voice and became a considerable part of the dramatic action. The new Queen’s voiced participation proved problematic for many Puritans and anti-theatricalists who disagreed not only with the theatre but more importantly with women’s participation therein. The Queen’s frequent participation in dramatics stemmed from her native France’s allowance of actresses onstage during this time. Sophie Tomlinson describes how Henrietta Maria’s “native custom of performing, not just in masques, but in spoken drama at the Caroline court turned female acting into a fashionable and controversial issue of the period and inspired a growth in women’s participation in private theatricals” (274) throughout her reign. Much like Anne of Denmark, Queen Henrietta “would never have played beneath her status” (Sanders “Salon” 459) – an important point that secured both queens’ reputations in terms of dramatic suitability. Unlike Anne, however, Queen Henrietta voiced her roles, though it was not simply her voice onstage that became the object of much public scrutiny. Her

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<sup>13</sup> Julie Sanders, as the current reigning *The Bird in a Cage* scholar (and the editor of the 2006 Manchester Press edition) has more than once examined Cavendish and Shirley alongside one another due to their similar treatment of all-female theatrical spheres. Valerie Traub also consecutively positions her accounts of *The Bird in a Cage* and *The Convent of Pleasure* in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* noting that “Cavendish follows in Shirley’s footsteps, enclosing her characters within the formidable walls of an aristocratic, all-female cloister... that is penetrated” (177). While I would note that Cavendish creates a unique all-female cloister owing to the choice her women have in entering it, the connection between the two plays is strong and it is therefore unsurprising that critics often examine them alongside one another.

“ladies were notorious... for attiring themselves as men as well as women in the context of their court performances in the 1620s and 1630s” (“Woman” 300). Her dramatic involvement, then, became problematic not solely on account of her role as female spectator/actress but also on account of the female cross-dressing she encouraged.

Some critics have begun to label Queen Henrietta Maria’s avid support of and participation in the theatre as protofeminist<sup>14</sup> and it is certain this so-termed protofeminist behaviour garnered much criticism on account of the public display of both her voice and body. As “the queen was... a regular visitor to [Blackfriars theatre], often taking significant foreign dignitaries along with her” (Sanders *Caroline* 35), not only did Henrietta Maria participate in the dramatic action at court, she often frequented the theatre. Sanders takes this as “an indication of her valorization of the form” (35). While many encouraged the queen’s participation in theatrics, others, such as William Prynne, were opposed to seeing and hearing these female spectators take part in the dramatic action. Calling actresses “notorious impudent, prostituted strumpets” (214),<sup>15</sup> Prynne’s published attacks against the theatre – and the Queen – would eventually cause the very public clipping of his ears (Rees 43).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Particularly, Julie Sanders adopts this view and finds it useful when comparing the Queen’s and Margaret Cavendish’s respective protofeminist tendencies – see Gweno Williams’s “‘Why May Not a Lady Write a Good Play?’: Plays by Early Modern women reassessed as performance texts” article in *Readings in Renaissance Women’s Drama: Criticism, History, and Performance 1594-1998*, eds. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, for more on this.

<sup>15</sup> In “The Table,” which functions as Prynne’s index to *Histriomastix* and directly follows his 1,006 page tract, Prynne’s entry for women-actors calls them “notorious whores” and says that “any Christian women be so more then whorishly impudent, as to act, to speake publickely on a Stage.”

<sup>16</sup> As earlier stated, seventeenth-century spectators would have gone to hear a play rather than to see it. While Prynne’s punishment – along with a hefty fine and imprisonment – reflects the common early modern practice of deforming the exterior of the body to reflect the interior, the disfiguration of his ears seems to coincide with what was considered an acoustic experience of play-going. By removing or clipping his ears, Prynne would have been able to see further drama but would not have been able to hear

In *Histriomastix*, Prynne includes numerous commentaries on women in the theatre, actresses on the stage and female cross-dressing. He proclaims that Women “ought not to frizzle or cut their haire, to weare false haire, to put on mens apparell, to paint their faces, or to weare garish lascivious attyre” (“Table”). Although the Queen’s court theatrics would not have been the only female performances of the day, he singles out both her onstage voice and her ladies’ cross-dressed behaviour, calling the practice of female-playing “a temptation to whoredome, and adultery” (215). While Prynne’s attacks would no doubt have been focussed on more than simply the Queen (as he attacks both men and women play-goers), his vehement concentration on female play-going would undoubtedly have been linked to the Queen herself, simply through her very visible participation in this particular realm.

It was Prynne’s focus on the Queen which eventually led to James Shirley’s purported defence of the Queen’s dramatic participation in *The Bird in a Cage*. Burner explains that “in the years 1633 and 1634 Shirley was at the height of his popularity” (Burner 93), writing almost exclusively for the Cockpit theatre – “of which the Queen herself was patron” (Sanders *Caroline* 37). The Cockpit theatre was one of the private theatrical venues that had become popular in the later Renaissance and catered to an aristocratic audience – owing in part to increased admission fees. Sandra Burner provides an audience-oriented glimpse of this type of theatre:

The private theatre audience might also include gamesters, military men, city wives, and country gentlemen. All had special seating within the theatre, the exact position being dependent on the ability to pay a fee of sixpence for a seat in

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who was voicing their roles. Along with the removal of his ears, he was also “imprisoned for libel [and] fined £5,000” (Pastoor 6).

the top gallery to half a crown for a private box. A devotee could attend the theatre several times a week and see a different play every night. Most obnoxious to both playwright and players were the courtiers who paid 2/6d. to sit on a stool on stage, doing so simply to distract the audience, call attention to their dress, and make critical comments about the play being performed. (54-5)

John Orrell further explains that at the Cockpit “the benches [were] ranged... facing one another instead of the stage” so that the audience “looked as much at itself as at the play” (167). Burner’s and Orrell’s descriptions each support the creation of a theatrical gaze within these private playhouses. And, it would have been upon these private stages that the Queen and her ladies performed.

In her examination of the *The Bird in a Cage*’s potential for female erotics, Valerie Traub explains that “just weeks before Prynne’s publication, the Queen and her ladies had performed speaking parts at court in Walter Montague’s [eight hour] pastoral extravaganza, *The Shepherd’s Paradise*” (175). It was this rather lengthy masque that provided Prynne with fuel for his tract as the Queen and her ladies cross-dressed and spoke throughout this pastoral. “Selected by the Inns of Court to write a masque that would demonstrate... loyalty and support of the queen’s artistic endeavours” (Burner 93), Shirley ironically dedicates the play to Prynne, calling him “a patron to the Muses” (179-80). Shirley addresses one “Master William Prynne” (178) and says that *The Bird in a Cage*, “for it comprehending also another play or interlude, personated by ladies... would have pleased you infinitely in the presentment” (179). His tongue-in-cheek dedication presents the play-within as something of which Prynne would have approved. Shirley

positions Prynne as a willing recipient of the play as a means of reinforcing and supporting female participation in the theatre at large.

Although Shirley intended his play to support the Queen's playing, his treatment of private female theatre in *The Bird in a Cage*'s play-within actually seems to contradict his support of the Queen. Instead, Shirley's female spectator takes to the stage only to have patriarchy reassume control over her. The overall plot of *The Bird in a Cage* revolves around the Duke of Mantua imprisoning his daughter, Eugenia, and her ladies-in-waiting in a newly built castle. Once imprisoned, the women decide to enact a performance to help pass the time. Right from the opening line, Shirley focuses on that which will later become the women's private theatrical venue. Orpiano and Fulvio discuss how "he does not mean this building for a college, I hope" (1.1.1), showing the importance of the theatre to the overall plot. The Duke of Mantua later explains that he has built this "place to lay my treasure in safe from the Robber" (1.1.59-60). In other words, he has built this "palace" (1.1.41) in which to keep Eugenia safe from unworthy suitors.

Later in the scene, the Duke tries to convince Eugenia that "that place... shall be thy paradise" (1.1.92-3) but Eugenia refuses to accept it as anything other than a "prison" (1.1.42) where she will be "caged up" (1.1.51) and "barred the conversation, nay, the *sight*, of men" (1.1.118-9, my italics). Eugenia scolds her father for removing her from the sight of men. This reflects Shirley's recognition of the female body's heightened visibility in the early modern era and the often extreme measures which were taken to avoid such visibility. Just as women would have been able to call upon female-female discourse within the public theatrical domain in order to shield themselves from the

theatrical gaze, here we see how the Duke's choice in Eugenia's cell-mates is entirely dependent upon this pre-existing female sociability. Because of their intimate roles as her ladies-in-waiting, Donella, Katherina, Fidela, Mardona and Cassiana are to attend to Eugenia within the private sphere of the prison/palace just as they already attend to her within the private spaces outside the prison/palace. Eugenia's removal from the public eye – her enforced enclosure – is therefore synonymous with a move into an all-female sphere.

Following this opening scene in which the prison/palace is discussed – the “new prison” as Kim Walker terms it after the play-within's title – Eugenia and her women are then locked up and not seen again until act three, scene three. In the meantime, the women's potential suitors frantically attempt to break into the prison and the entire male community in the play becomes concerned with little else save the prison's penetrability. Morello disguises himself as a woman and attempts to sneak past the guard yet is discovered and punished by being forced to maintain this feminine mode of dress for one month. Bonamico and Carlo “enquire for a gentleman that teaches men to walk invisible” (2.1.312) yet fail to do anything other than fool the other suitors into giving them money. Even the Duke hires Rolliardo (who is a disguised Philenzo) to break into the all-female sphere, offering him no limit of riches should he succeed and a “penalty of death” (2.1.72) should he fail.

Philenzo's subplot is perhaps the most interesting of all the suitors, for it is he who eventually succeeds in breaking through both the guard and the castle's walls. We learn from the *dramatis personae* that he is “lover of Eugenia, under the guise and name of Rolliardo,” a persona he has chosen to adopt owing to his already banished state.



After refusing Bonamico's initial offer of help – "I gave fate no commission to take you up for me" (2.1.59), he eventually accepts Bonamico's aid and is consequently successful in penetrating the female sphere. Bonamico approaches the Duke toting "*a large cage filled with various species of birds*" (4.1.104-5). Believing the gift to be "a present the sweet soul will raise much joy in" (4.1.191-2), the Duke readily accepts the cage and decides to deliver it to his daughter in the prison. Within the cage's centre pillar, however, hides Philenzo and it is precisely this method by which he is able to secure entrance into the gynosocial sphere – notably, during the women's dramatic performance.

Walker is apt to note that "Eugenia herself is absent when the [dramatic] plan is set in motion in 3.3" (395). It is initially Donella who proposes they "play some pretty comic story" (3.3.32-3) in order to "cozen our melancholy" (3.3.7). One interesting aspect of Donella's suggestion of theatre is that Eugenia's lady-in-waiting is shown as the dramatic instigator instead of Eugenia herself. This seems a confusion of Queen Henrietta Maria's usual engagement of her ladies in the action though Eugenia does decide upon which masque they will perform. She chooses the story "of Jupiter and Danae [as it] comes near our own" (4.2.2) and decides to "play Danae, that is shut up in the brazen tower" (4.2.10-11). Much like Anne of Denmark of the early Renaissance masques and Queen Henrietta Maria, who "in her masques... was never less than a princess in the parts she played... Eugenia chooses a part which reflects her own social status as a nobleman's daughter" (Sanders *Caroline* 38). As well as mimicking her real-life status in her dramatic role, the women also enact a play which mimics their specific situation. For them, meta-dramatically representing their situation allows them to resist, specifically, their enforced imprisonment and, generally, patriarchy at large.

Although the women's performance lacks a 'proper' audience, Donella notes the good fortune of having no men around to see them act: "we can receive no disparagement; our spectators cannot jeer us, for we'll speak but to the people in the hangings" (3.3.44-6). By positioning the arras, or hangings, as spectators, Donella alludes to the feminine nature of the audience, which also includes Eugenia and her ladies. From the close association between fabric and female privacy examined in chapter one, it may be a stretch to consider the fabric hangings *as* female but it certainly is no stretch to consider the gynosomal implications of having fabric stand in where the audience would normally be. Furthermore, once the performance of "Jupiter and Danae" gets underway, "Mardona and Fidelia hide behind the arras" (4.2.29-30) in an effort which highlights fabric's potential for cloaking the female body within the theatrical sphere.

As the performance continues, we see how the women become both actresses and spectators, in a move which mimicked Queen Henrietta Maria's double role as regal spectator and playing participant. Shirley's decision to include Eugenia in the spectacle seems only permissible within the play on account of the very private nature of the women's theatre – which would have closely resembled the more private nature of the Queen's court drama. Kim Walker notes how *The Bird in a Cage* "can be read as an uneasy attempt to authorize the female actor, which in the process recuperates her for patriarchy" (395). Although the women are allowed to perform in the drama, they do so while imprisoned and away from the public eye. Shirley establishes the private stage as a perfectly legitimate venue for women, provided they are there strictly on men's terms, as

is the case with the women's enforced enclosure. As such, Shirley fails to fully authorize the female spectator as actress.

Although Donella decides that they "will not present it to the princess, but engage her person in the action" (39-40), Eugenia's inclusion in the dramatic action does not exempt her from spectating, as well. She, along with the other ladies, watches the dramatic action unfold as they wait for their respective entrances. It does not take long for the women to start critiquing their own theatrical endeavours: Donella remarks that Eugenia's performance "is excellent!" (4.2.57) then laughs at Cassiana's inability to rhyme 'dream' – "ha, ha,ha!" (4.2.63-4). Cassiana equally comments on the other women's reactions when she asks "does not the arras laugh at me?" (4.2.65). Mardona and Fidelia's placement behind the arras cause the arras to shake (4.2.65) which Katherina attributes to "one behind [who] does tickle it" (4.2.66). The women's criticism of the play and each other continues throughout the dramatic action until the "*bell [rings] within*" (4.2.166) and the "play is interrupted" (4.2.168). Through this, Eugenia and her women become "audience and actor, object and subject at once" (Walker 400). Just as the public theatre fashioned women in the audience as both audience and spectacle, the women within this gynosomal sphere are equally positioned as both audience and spectacle due to their unique position as both watchers of and participants in the dramatic action.

As Shirley provides only one official "exit" by which the women can enter or leave the meta-theatrical stage, it is unclear exactly how these imprisoned women position themselves within their spectating arena. As spectator/actresses, they seem to be close to the action at all times and remain onstage even when they have no lines. The

only spectator/actresses who do exit are Donella and Mardona prior to each of their entrances as men. Mardona has been given the part of “the king Acrisius, [Danae’s] father, a jealous, harsh, crabbed man” (4.2.14). Before entering the stage as the king, she does not exit the playing arena but does hide behind the arras. Likewise, Donella exits some lines prior to her re-entrance as Jupiter. In light of these two ‘exits,’ it would seem that both women must leave and return in order to signal their breaks with femininity and enact male roles. These breaks seem necessary as neither woman has opted to sport a beard or cross-dress to perform these male parts.

Unlike Queen Henrietta Maria’s women, who would have performed the roles of men in men’s clothing, Mardona’s and Donella’s removal from the gynosomal sphere allows them to re-enter the playing arena without participating in what Prynne sees as an “abomination to the Lord thy God” (179). Although Shirley purports to refute Prynne’s criticism, he seems to support Prynne’s opinion that “the woman shall not weare that which pertaineth unto a man” (179) by having each character retain her female comportment in her enactment of male behaviour. The women even comment on the custom of cross-dressing for the purpose of dramatic production, saying there is “no matter for properties... we’ll imagine... you have a beard” (4.2.17-8). In the footnote accompanying these lines, Julie Sanders suggests that by not having the women assume masculine habits, “Shirley protects his female performers from some of Prynne’s particular charges about transvestism and the stage” (240). Whether or not he avoids their transvestism to protect them – and whether or not the performers are, indeed, female – he inevitably winds up supporting Prynne’s position and therefore undermining Queen Henrietta Maria’s dramatic practice of cross-dressing.

Another aspect of Prynne's attack that Shirley seems to support is that men will inevitably penetrate the female theatrical sphere, especially once the female spectator takes to the stage. When the bell rings and interrupts the women's performance, Cassiana leaves to inquire after what "news from [Eugenia's] father" (4.2.167) awaits the women. She then returns, leading in the cage filled "with a variety of birds" (4.2.174-5), at which point Eugenia's ladies-in-waiting exit the room and Eugenia is left alone to discover "[Philenzo *disguised as*] Rolliardo [*coming*] *from the pillar*" (s.d. 4.2.205). That Philenzo is successful in his attempt to penetrate the gynosocial sphere of the prison only during the women's performance shows Shirley's concurrent support and denial of the Queen's participation in the theatre. He shows how the women are able to use each other in their dramatic endeavours to resist the limitations of their situation; yet he also shows that this resistance is inevitably thwarted as the staged female spectator allows for outside penetration of the female dramatic sphere.

As the play-within "can be read in terms of the play's recuperation and containment of female deviancy" (Walker 400), it is important to note the point in the 'New Prison' plot at which the women receive the cage. Donella as Jupiter has just entered and is about to rape Danae (as in the Ovidian myth) but Philenzo's 'rape' – or stealthy penetration – of the women's guarded prison puts an end to this. From this, it would appear that Shirley uses this moment to show how the female spectator is unable to ever fully escape a male gaze once she puts her body and voice onstage. The prison's gynosocial community may enact their own rape scene as a means of resisting the terms of their patriarchal existence but through this resistance they only allow for further patriarchal penetration. In this move, Shirley positions the late Renaissance female

spectator/actress as a spectacle that no matter how private the theatrical venue, is still constituted by the male theatrical gaze.

Many years later, after the Commonwealth and the restoration of the monarchy, Margaret Cavendish offers a similar treatment of the female spectator in *The Convent of Pleasure*. This play also concerns itself with an enclosed gynosomal community and Cavendish shows the penetrative force of the male gaze within the private theatrical domain once the regal female spectator takes to the stage. One key difference between Cavendish's and Shirley's plays, though, is that her gynosomal community is chosen by its female constituents while Shirley's is forced upon them. Lady Happy creates a female safe space wherein she and the other women may "incloister [themselves] from the incumbered cares and vexations, troubles and perturbation of the World" (220); a place wherein women may voluntarily remove themselves from the company of men, men being "only the troublers of Women" (220). She and the others vow "to live a single life... with all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful" (220). Cavendish's creation of this all-female sphere allows for the women's voluntary removal from patriarchy in a way that Shirley's enforced enclosure does not.

Another discrepancy between the two plays is their intended publication and performance histories. While Shirley was the "playwright in residence" (Burner 48) at the Cockpit theatre for many years and saw much of his work performed on the Cockpit's stage, Cavendish seems not to have intended her plays for performance on any public stage. This has led to a lot of criticism surrounding not only Cavendish's intentions and the sheer (un)stageability of the plays themselves<sup>17</sup>, but also the unreceptive theatrical

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<sup>17</sup> Gweno Williams proved that *The Convent of Pleasure* is "certainly stageable" ("Silent" 120) when she and her students successfully performed the play in its entirety in 1995; she stresses that a "careful,

climate for female playwrights of the time. Will Pritchard suggests that during the mid-century, a play of female authorship “[possessed] the powerful allure of a female body... [and] therefore [risked] being viewed as sceptically and punished as severely as a female body” (101). Regardless of a play’s ability for performance, female playwrights could have used closet drama as a means of having their plays heard all the while protecting themselves from public scrutiny.

In her examination of early modern closet drama, Marta Straznicky seems to support Cavendish’s plays as closet drama – and therefore unperformable upon any ‘proper’ stage – but does not limit these plays’ potential for performance through “play reading” (112). The emerging practices of closet drama and play reading bring us once again to the changing face of theatre in the mid-seventeenth century. While there were a handful of female playwrights writing in the early part of the century (Elizabeth Cary, for example, publishing *The Tragedie of Mariam* as early as 1613), closet drama strongly emerged during and following the Commonwealth. It afforded women a voice in a political climate in which “women writers in England did not have the same privileged professional access to the commercial theatre as men” (Williams “Why” 97). During this time, the limited access women had to the public stage caused the creation of drama for more private spheres. These closet dramas were meant “to be viewed only in the closeted domestic spaces (bedchambers, libraries, closets) which are the most common sites of recreational reading in the early modern period” (Straznicky 2). These plays were meant

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attentive and unprejudiced reading of these texts as performable rather than unperformable reveals considerable exciting evidence in the form of internal stage directions... metatheatrical devices and references... and specific references to the presence of an audience, particularly in calls for applause” (“Why” 99). Julie Sanders notes that even though Cavendish’s plays “were written as ‘private’ drama... they frequently employ tropes of performance and of public speaking” (“Closet” 128).

to be read instead of performed but as Sanders and Williams have both noted, Cavendish's publication of her plays nonetheless garnered them public attention.

*The Convent of Pleasure* has become one of her most widely read dramatic texts since its initial publication in *Plays, Never Before Printed* in 1668. Critical attention has been especially directed to the voluntary gynsocial community its protagonist, Lady Happy, creates and its innovation in terms of female authorship. Although Cavendish terms this community a "Convent," this is not to suggest the women decide to enter a nunnery wherein they will devote themselves to God. Instead, the title refers more to the limited options available to women during the seventeenth century (which included either entering into a marital contract or a nunnery) and Lady Happy's recognition of these limitations. Lady Happy's decision to create a space removed from patriarchal society allows "women at the convent... [to] evade the dangers associated with marriage as well as the economic hardship that result when they become the legal property of their husbands and lose access to their own discretionary economic pleasure" (Kellet 426). The play opens with three gentlemen discussing Lady Happy's recent (and hefty) inheritance of her father's wealth. Cavendish thus immediately locates Lady Happy within a larger system of patriarchal exchange. The three anonymous gentleman claim it is "too much [money] for one Woman to possess" should the men not "have her" (217). By beginning with this brief exchange and hearing of Lady Happy first through a male discussion of her financial and marital status, Cavendish confirms Lady Happy's decision to remove herself from a socio-economic system that makes her little more than property.

Within the convent itself, we learn quickly that there are just "Female Servants" (223) and the women's relationships there are to be exclusively with other women.



Madame Mediator explains that within the convent's walls there are "Women-Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries" (223) which confirms Cavendish's "feminocentric" (Tomlinson 275) tendencies by showing women's ability to perform these generally male professions within the convent's walls. These posts also signal that within the convent, only women will deal with each other's embodiment. As there is "not so much as to a Grate" (223) through which to peer between the outside world and inside the convent, it becomes clear that the convent is a female safe space wherein the usual rules of comportment in front of a male gaze do not apply.

One fact that complicates this is the Princess's entrance into the Convent. Unbeknownst to everyone in the convent, as well as initially the reader, the Princess is actually a Prince in disguise – a fact that is later discovered only once the ladies' dramatic action has ended. The dramatic action, in fact, centres around the Prince(ss)'s presence within the convent. Immediately following Lady Happy's admittance of the Prince(ss) to the convent, a woman enters the scene and proclaims that "the Play is ready to be Acted" (229). That the meta-theatrical performance gets underway only once the Prince(ss) has arrived demonstrates Cavendish's strong association between the court and female spectatorship, perhaps from her connection to Queen Henrietta Maria. After the women are seated, the play-within begins with an extremely short prologue in which Cavendish undermines the oft-cited dichotomy between seeing and hearing in the theatre:

Noble Spectators, you shall see to night  
A Play, which though't be dull, yet's short to sight;  
For, since we cannot please your Ears with Wit,  
We will not tyre your limbs, long here to sit. (229)

These four lines position the spectators as “viewers” of the play instead of “hearers.” By suggesting that the dialogue will not be able to “please your Ears with Wit,” Cavendish is alluding to the fact that female playwrights in the seventeenth century were not afforded the same esteem as men. Thus, this play-within will be “dull” at the hands of women. Here, Cavendish seems to be using a tongue-in-cheek reference to signal women’s ability to participate and thrive in a dramatic sphere, despite common opinion otherwise.

Although the prologue sets up the audience for disappointment, the play-within has more than its share of willing spectators, all of them female. Aside from Lady Happy and the Prince(ss), “*the rest of the Ladies belonging to the Convent*” (228) enter alongside them at the beginning of this scene and do not exit before the performance. When Lady Happy and the Prince(ss) “*sit down*” (229), it seems likely that the rest of the women also seat themselves, most likely behind these two noble spectators. Although there are no stage directions to inform our reading of the theatrical venue or the seating arrangements, the play-within’s subject matter could not be clearer: it “is a kind of Everywoman play: a concise, episodic, female theatre-of-the-world” (Findlay, et. al. 142). The nine short scenes comprising the play-within each concern themselves with a different hardship of female life within the patriarchal system of exchange that dictates women’s lives outside the convent. The various women proclaim that “Marriage were a curse” (230), lament that their husbands are “careless and idle” (231) and often drunk, show the extreme pain associated with labour – “Oh my back, my back will break, Oh! Oh! Oh!” (232) – and question “who would desire Children, since they come to such misfortunes?” (232). By “graphically [dramatising] the suffering of women within marriage” (Pearson 132), the play manages to forefront female embodiment. Although

the topic of marriage became the staple of much Restoration drama, Cavendish stages childbirth as a means of forefronting this specifically female problem that was usually left off the public seventeenth-century stage.

Despite the labouring woman in the play dying after being “in strong labour these three days of a dead child” (232), Williams notes that “medical histories of the period indicate that these scenes under- rather than overstate the risks and rigours of childbirth in the Early Modern period” (“Why” 103). Gail Kern Paster has alluded to childbirth being “especially invisible in dramatic representation” (163). Cavendish’s use of this event in her metatheatrical performance reinforces how certain topics were only permissible within female spheres. She uses childbirth to draw attention to the male prerogative that dictated much theatrical production in the seventeenth century and limited childbirth’s presence, or discussion, on the public stage.

While this perhaps adds to why her plays are often considered unstageable, within the spectrum of the all-female society, the play’s content reinforces the women’s decision to enter the convent. As a tool of patriarchal resistance, the women’s private theatre shows its audience how their decision to “[retire] from the World” (220) is, indeed, the right one. Lady Happy and the Prince(ss) briefly converse following the play-within’s epilogue to demonstrate each woman’s varying degree of support for the play’s content.

Lady Happy: Pray Servant, how do you like this Play?

Princess: My sweet Mistress, I cannot in conscience approve of it; for though some few be unhappy in Marriage, yet there are many more than are so happy as they would not change their condition.

Lady Happy: O Servant, I fear you will become an Apostate.

Princess: Not to you sweet Mistress.

Whereas Lady Happy seems to enjoy the play's reinforcement of her convent's purpose, the Prince(ss)'s disapproval coincides with her later revelation as a man. Not wanting the Prince(ss) to contradict the play's attempt at patriarchal resistance, Lady Happy suggests that her lack of enjoyment of the play's content is directly related to her vows of chastity and female friendship into which she has entered in the convent. For the Prince(ss) to disagree with the play's overall message would mean that she also disagrees with the creation of the convent.

Cavendish may present this play-within as a means of supporting women's participation in the theatrical realm but in the two masques that follow she shows the dangers of the regal spectator taking to the stage. By refusing to fully support the female position of the play-within, the Prince(ss) "influences the next convent drama... [as] the plays discard separatist discourse to stage a pastoral scene that enacts heterosexual paradigms for desire" (Bonin 350). Following a kiss between Lady Happy and the Prince(ss), the scene is changed into a pastoral masque with Lady Happy performing the role of a Shepherdess and the Prince(ss) performing the role of a Shepherd. Although the scene evokes a vision of same-sex marriage in each woman's long verses or vows – Lady Happy even pronouncing that "we shall more constant be, And in a Married life better agree" (238) – the women enact "heteronormative performances of the Maypole festivities... [which] appear to reconstruct patriarchy" (Kellet 430). They may be two women performing these romantic roles but they are still very much fashioned as male and female in their performative roles.

Following this dramatic performance, in which there are “*Rural Sports, as Country Dances about the May-Pole*” (238), the regal female spectators immediately participate in another masque, this time dressed as Neptune and a Sea-Goddess. In yet another reconstruction of heterosexual partnering, the women participate in this romantic interlude which, at first, seems to support Traub’s claim that “licensed through the artifice of the pastoral, explored through the strategy of transvestism, and supported by a sororal community, ‘feminine’ homoeroticism appears as part and parcel of the pleasures Lady Happy deems a noblewoman’s natural right” (180). This natural right, however, is undermined once Madame Mediator enters the scene and proclaims, while “*wringing her hands... full of Passion,*” (243) that “there is a man disguised in the *Convent*” (243). A few short lines later, the Prince(ss) is exposed as a Prince, a revelation which goes unremarked upon by Lady Happy who grows more and more silent as the play draws to its conclusion. That this scene directly follows Lady Happy’s participation within the dramatic action harkens back to Shirley’s male penetration of the female sphere during the female spectator’s performance. Cavendish is careful to establish Lady Happy first as a spectator in the play-within before having her perform alongside the Prince(ss) in the masques. It is precisely this aspect of female spectatorship which allows for the masculine penetration of the convent; Cavendish shows how women’s private theatre may be a gynosocial tool in resisting patriarchy but once the female spectator takes to the stage, she is unable to resist it any longer. Already participating in the theatrical gaze as a spectator, she is unable to find any relief from its effects once she steps onstage; she is at the centre of the gaze and therefore reclaimed by the patriarchal dictates of the seventeenth-century theatrical situation.

Following the Prince's discovery, the play ends rather conventionally with "a swift resolution" (Andreadis 87), "a conservative conclusion" (Williams "Silent" 117), a "mandatory recuperation... into the realm of heteronormative marriage" (Drouin 93). Owing to the seeming disjunction between the heteronormative ending and the rest of the gynocentric play, some critics have suggested that Cavendish's husband wrote the play's conclusion.<sup>18</sup> Although *The Convent of Pleasure* ends traditionally with a marriage, it is not without first showing women's potential for relief from patriarchy through their combined dramatic efforts. While I do not fully agree with Eric Bonin's opinion that Cavendish creates a completely utopian space in the convent, I concur that "the convent's utopian potential lies in its capacity to house forms of female authority and autonomy unthinkable in other social contexts" (347). Within the convent, women are able to use private theatre as a gynosocial tool in their resistance of patriarchy and stage content that would not have been allowed on the public stage. However, much like Shirley's women, the encloistered women learn that by putting themselves onstage in front of the theatrical gaze, they allow themselves to be reassumed by patriarchy.

From these two meta-theatrical episodes, we see that women were able to use female sociability in the theatre as a means of resisting patriarchy, however temporarily. However, in each of these instances, there is once again the idea of vulnerability surrounding the female spectator's position onstage. Neither Cavendish nor Shirley present the female spectator performing alone; she is always accompanied by other women assuming their own onstage roles. Queen Henrietta Maria's women were a large part of her dramatic action and it seems that without the other women to back her up, she

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<sup>18</sup> It is unclear whether Margaret Cavendish or her husband, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, finished the play as act five scene two begins with "*written by my Lord Duke*" and there are no italics to show where his collaboration ends.

may have been unable to stage herself as prominently. Without her fellow female performers, she may have been able to do nothing except stand there mutely, showing once again the female spectator's dependency on other women and her vulnerability to them within the playhouse.

### Chapter Three – Disguising the Bawdy: Masking in the Restoration Theatre

As the first scene opens in William D’Avenant’s 1663 *The Playhouse to be Let*, the Tire-woman and the Char-woman “*upon two stools are discover’d... one shelling of beans, and the other sewing*” (S.D. 17). The women perform these tasks on the side of the meta-theatrical stage and are present onstage throughout the entire first act wherein numerous lessees successfully let the playhouse. While the Tire-Woman repeatedly leaves her post of shelling beans and engages the different lessees in conversation, the Char-Woman remains seated and sewing. Aligned with her role in the fashioning of fabric, the Char-Woman does not engage in the action, nor does the action engage her. Instead, she is able to parlay her post as “a woman hired by the day to do odd jobs” (*OED*) into spectatorial anonymity. In chapter one I suggested that cloaking the female body within the early seventeenth-century theatre would have been a common practice. Here, D’Avenant presents us with an instance of female spectatorial anonymity that once again has a strong connection with fabric. Unlike earlier female spectators, though, the Tire-Woman and Char-Woman do not engage each other and they do not seemingly resist any larger patriarchal force at work in the playhouse. They may not use each other to any remarkable ends but from this brief episode, D’Avenant shows how the Restoration female spectator’s alignment with other women in the theatre was often far less helpful than it had been earlier in the century.

This chapter examines approximately ten meta-theatrical Restoration female spectators and their precarious role in each other’s spectatorial experiences. The Restoration involved a complete re-thinking of women’s place in the theatre after the rise of the English actress. Owing to the spectacle of the female body onstage, women’s



sexuality became even further mediated in the theatre than had previously been the case but surprisingly few plays present women in the playhouse between 1660 and 1700. It is fifteen years after D'Avenant's *The Playhouse to be Let* that Thomas Shadwell presents us with five female spectators in his 1678 *A True Widow*. It is another nineteen before John Dennis's 1697 *A Plot, and No Plot*. In both of these meta-theatrical episodes, women actively seek to control the mediation of their sexuality while at the theatre and often employ women to help them do so. Although communal play-going was far less of a safety net than earlier in the century, women's role in each other's spectatorial experiences became much more necessary and consequently, much more dangerous.

D'Avenant's early Restoration play showcases three of the main traits that come to typify the appearance of female spectators in late seventeenth-century drama: firstly, female spectators are never in the theatre without other women present. Although the Char-woman may not have any lines, her presence onstage with the Tire-Woman allows for the type of female network that characterized much of women's public life in Restoration London. Secondly, the Char-Woman's post as a seamstress invokes the types of masks and disguises women repeatedly employed within the late seventeenth-century playhouse to control and shape their visibility before the theatrical gaze. Thirdly, the meta-theatrical female spectators are always vulnerable to each other and often exploit each other's vulnerability to harmful ends. I have already shown how female spectators were vulnerable to each other as early as the Renaissance but this chapter explores how women actively exploited this vulnerability in the late seventeenth-century playhouse in order to further their individual gains.

The last four acts of *The Playhouse to be Let* centre around the events of the first act in which different lessees attempt to rent the playhouse for their own theatrical ends. Following this opening act, each subsequent act displays the lessees' successful rentals of the space. It is less than ten lines into act one when there is the first "knocking heard at the door" (S.D. 17) and this quick succession of lessees continues. Although *The Playhouse to be Let* was first produced in 1663, D'Avenant sets the action in the Commonwealth during when the public theatres would have been empty. The Player suggests that they are letting the playhouse so that they "would find means to live, this dead vacation" (21). The closure of the theatres ended with Charles II's ascendance to the throne in 1660 and his commission of the two new playing companies: the Duke's Men and the King's Men. Perhaps D'Avenant shows the Commonwealth theatrical climate as particularly prosperous because he is actually reflecting the Restoration's newfound theatrical prosperity.

Apart from providing us with early examples of female spectators, *The Playhouse to be Let* also provides the earliest meta-theatrical representation of a Restoration playhouse. Throughout the late seventeenth century, there were numerous playhouses in use by the two acting companies. The editor of *The Playhouse to be Let* notes that the play "was, without a doubt produced at the Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields" in 1663 (anon. 3) yet in which theatre it is set remains unclear. Lincoln's Inn Fields would have been the third playhouse used by D'Avenant's Duke's Company, after using the Salisbury Court theatre and the Cockpit in Drury Lane (Thomson 29). The company moved to Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1661 and figure thirteen is an isometric representation of the theatre. It was a relatively small indoor theatre with a seating capacity of "perhaps

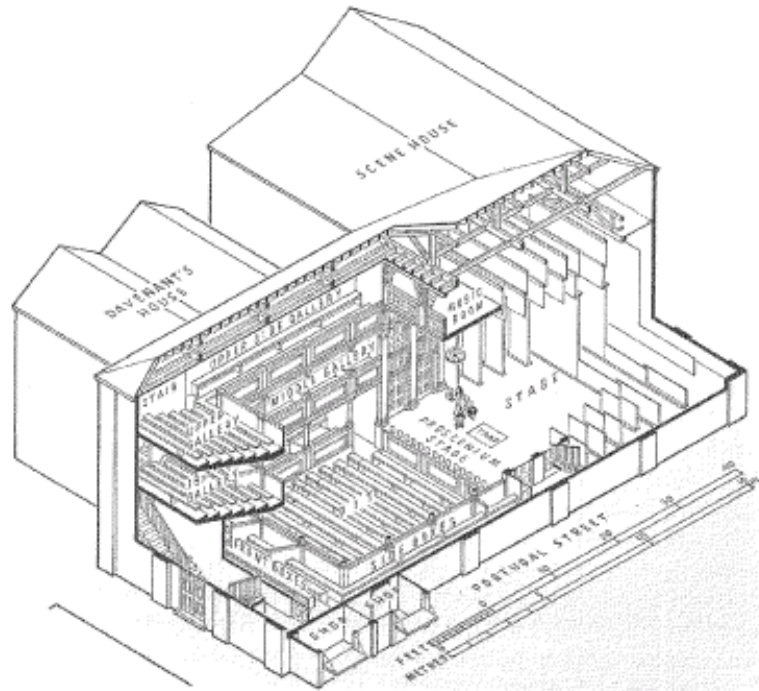


Figure Thirteen: Richard Leacroft's isometric representation of the Lincoln's Inn Fields Playhouse, 1661.

400" (Langhans 3) and was "built within the confines of a roofed tennis court" (Langhans 7). Its small atmosphere would have created terrific intimacy between the audience and the performers, as well as the audience members.

The Duke's Company remained in Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse until 1671 when they moved to the newly-completed Dorset Garden theatre in November 1671. In the early part of the Restoration, Dorset Garden theatre (the playhouse in which Shadwell's *A True Widow* is set), was considered both the "best-equipped of the post-Restoration theatres" as far as scenery and spectacle were concerned but acoustically "better-suited to opera than to plays" (Thomson 17). When the Duke's Company's moved to Dorset Garden theatre in 1671, they left the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre empty once again allowing the King's Company to relocate there when the first Theatre Royal

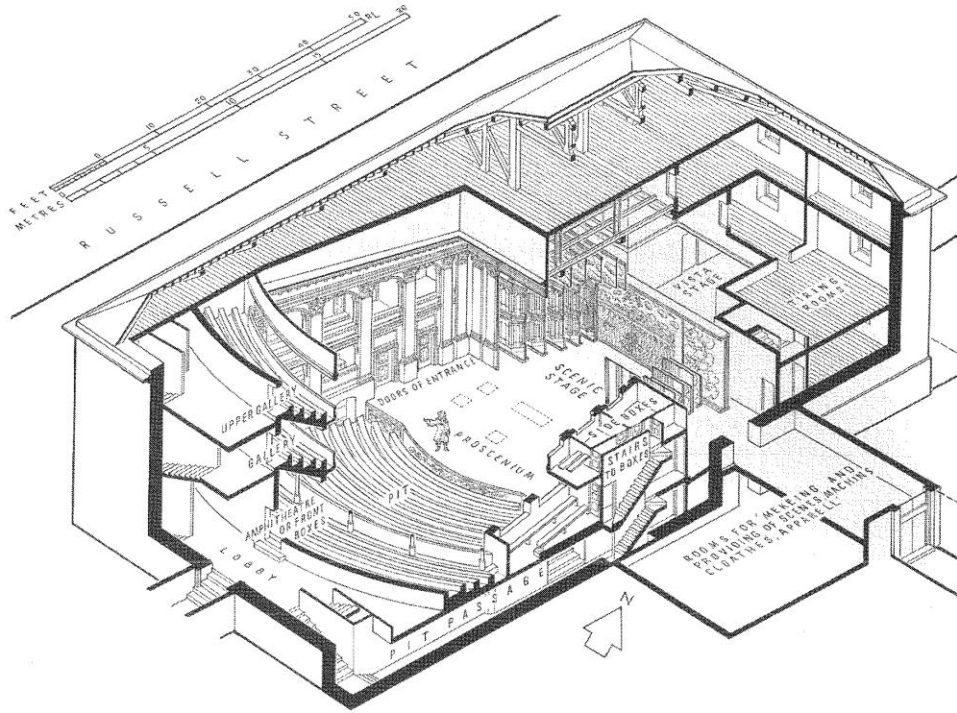


Figure Fourteen: Richard Leacroft's isometric representation of the Drury Lane Playhouse, 1674.

burned in 1672. The King's Company remained in the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre until the new Theatre Royal in Drury Lane was completed in 1674 (29).

The Theatre Royal in Drury Lane was still relatively small compared to the Renaissance amphitheatres though much larger than its Restoration predecessors with “an estimated capacity of 1,200” (Pritchard 87). Figure fourteen is another of Richard Leacroft's isometric cross-sections, this one depicting the 1674 Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. Much like the Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse, we see how there are stage boxes along the side walls, three levels of gallery seating and a pit with benches – albeit here they are curved benches. Thomson explains how “almost two-thirds of the interior length of the rebuilt Theatre Royal (1674) was occupied by the stage” (49) and that “the back wall of the auditorium... was about 10 metres from the front of the stage” (51). Although

ten metres might seem a rather limited space in which to house the 800-1,200 spectators, as we see in figure fourteen, there was still room enough for these spectators and a lobby, all the while creating an intimate atmosphere for everyone in the playhouse.

The late seventeenth-century audience fluctuated daily and depended on new plays and popular repertory pieces in order to bring in the estimated “200 spectators... needed at each theatre just to make ‘house charges’” (Hume 49). Regardless of a play’s popularity, Thomson has suggested that “the performance of the audience began before the performance of the play” (51). The audience area within these small theatres was lit equally to the stage, allowing the spectators to see the actions of the audience around them as clearly as the action occurring onstage. Often, this offstage performance proved much more interesting than the one onstage. Langhans explains the oft-disruptive and always social nature of the Restoration audience: “for many people, theatregoing was a social occasion: they could talk to friends, meet new people, criticize the play, make assignations, follow the plot, lose interest, get caught up, turn away, turn back, come, go, hear, hear not” (16). Despite Langhans’s lengthy list of these various social aspects of the audience, he fails to mention the opportunity for gazing that would have also accompanied one’s spectatorial experience. Often, the audience was there to watch and be watched by the other spectators around them just as much as the performance onstage.

One factor that largely contributed to women’s visibility before the Restoration theatrical gaze was the newly staged actress. For the first time, women appeared regularly on the public stage and drastically changed what it meant to be a female playgoer. Cynthia Lowenthal rightly notes that “theatre in any age demands that its spectators observe and look” (20) but the advent of the actress in the Restoration

playhouse “made it easier and safer to look at women” (Pritchard 83). Instead of witnessing boy actors playing the women’s roles, the Restoration female spectator’s sexuality was mediated through the spectacle of the female body onstage and the prostitutes throughout the audience. Will Pritchard suggests the spectacle of the onstage actress meant that women in the audience “were not only watched as closely as the actresses, they were watched as if they *were* actresses” (103). And because of this, women did start to perform. What is less clear, then, is exactly how the female spectator used other women around her to help her perform in front of this gaze.

The emergent public and private spheres of the late seventeenth century meant that women became more and more concerned with staging themselves before the public eye. As we have seen, early modern women were integral in each other’s private lives, finding themselves “alone together during labours and lyings-in” and meeting “in the course of marketing and doing other chores” (Brown, Pamela 56). In the domestic space of the home, they were aligned with each other and often prepared one another for their public display. Once in public, they used each other to control how much of their private selves actually shone through their manufactured exteriors. Will Pritchard explains how the public space of the playhouse offered a venue wherein the public display of women’s bodies and the female discourse of their private lives converged:

By offering a legitimate, state-sanctioned venue for the public and deceptive display of women, the playhouse intentionally confounded distinctions between authentic and counterfeit, legible and unknowable, and public and private, distinctions that Restoration culture elsewhere worked to define and preserve.

(82)

Women's role in each other's private lives provided a foundation for their mutual creation of privacy before the public theatrical gaze. They learned to translate their private relations into a constructed public display – a performance. Within the theatre, women were able to stage “the female exterior (an alluring but deceptive surface)” (16) to their own ends and helped each other to do so. They publically counterfeited themselves in order to authenticate their private lives; they used their domestic alignment in public in order to further their private selves.

Women's vulnerability to each other in the playhouse often traversed social barriers. David Roberts has suggested that “any gathering of fine ladies was certain to be attended by a number of waiting-women” (83) and Lowenthal furthers this point by explaining the different classes of women that could have been in regular attendance. She notes how it would not have been uncommon to have “a lady's companions and maidservants; female relatives of members of parliament... royal mistresses, duchesses, and the wives of the aristocracy” (111) all at the same afternoon performance and suggests that this type of cross-section of society would have typified Restoration theatre in general. Owing to these various women in the theatre, the female spectator had access to women from all social classes along with the potential to use them to perform before the theatrical gaze.

When Pritchard suggests that “a woman was not, or was not necessarily, who she appeared to be in the playhouse” (33), he touches not only on the practice of physically disguising oneself to attend the theatre but also on the common female practice of cloaking an emotional response to bawdy moments in the play. In terms of disguise, many women took to wearing masks in the early part of the Restoration as a means of

disguising themselves – and their reactions – before the theatrical gaze. These vizard-masks in the theatre initially allowed women to avoid public scrutiny and Pritchard explains how the mask’s “original function... seems to have been to safeguard female innocence by shielding women from a play’s jests or a spectator’s gaze” (106). As well as creating intrigue for those other spectators, women could have used these masks in order to avoid being seen outwardly reacting during particularly bawdy moments in the play. A mask may not have concealed a woman’s blush but by hiding her identity from the other spectators in attendance, a mask would have actually allowed a woman to respond to the play without later being accused of having understood its sexual undertones. While the early Restoration found many reputable women employing vizard-masks at the theatre<sup>19</sup>, eventually “the wearing of vizard masks became so disreputable a practice that some forgot it had ever been innocent” (107). Whether the mask was used to hide “the decayed face of the prostitute or the healthier features of a fashionable woman” (Roberts 86), it allowed women to hide their reactions from the audience at large and manufacture a facade within the playhouse whenever necessary. Much like cloaking, donning a mask allowed the female spectator to better control her outward appearance before the theatrical gaze.

The act of consciously staging oneself before a theatrical gaze became a common topic in many late seventeenth-century plays. In Sir John Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Wife*, the young Bellinda and the married Lady Brute engage each other in a discussion about proper female decorum during such moments. Bellinda says that during a play’s

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<sup>19</sup> Elin Diamond notes that “married women like Mrs. Evelyn and Mrs. Pepys, wore vizards similar to the ones worn by professional prostitutes or their theatrical mimics on stage – Pepys mentions stowing at the Exchange with his wife to buy her one” (66). That these masks were employed by reputable women as well as prostitutes suggests the initial practicality and freedom that women found from being able to disguise themselves at the theatre.



indecent moments, she “always [takes] that occasion to blow [her] nose” (3.3.87). By admitting to her aunt that she feigns a runny nose, Bellinda uses her aunt to tap into a network of cloaked female response. She cloaks her reactions, thus her face, and relays this information to her aunt as someone who will understand her need to do so. From her knowledge of when to cloak her response, though, it is clear that Bellinda understands both the double entendres of the dialogue and the playhouse politics which would have held sway over her reputation. Lady Brute also understands these politics but as an older, married woman, she is better able to react freely to the play’s double entendres. Less concerned with protecting her modesty, she admits to thriving on the heightened visibility she attains in the playhouse:

Why then, I confess that I love to sit in the forefront of a box; for if one sits behind, there’s two acts gone perhaps before one’s found out.... I watch with impatience for the next jest in the play, that I may laugh and show my white teeth. If the poet has been dull and the jest be long a-coming, I pretend to whisper one to my friend, and from thence fall into a little short discourse in which I take occasion to show my face in all humours: brisk, pleased, serious, melancholy, languishing. (52-64)

Bellinda and her aunt’s varied responses to the theatrical gaze show how different women would have performed differently for the gaze. The married Lady Brute is willing to display her reactions and herself before this theatrical gaze whereas the unmarried Bellinda, whose virtue is in constant question in the playhouse, must cloak her understanding of the play’s content for fear of erotic scrutiny.

Lady Brute's marital status allows her to outwardly enjoy the bawdy moments without tarnishing her reputation but as a woman she recognizes her niece's need to protect her virtue. Lady Brute asks Bellinda if she has "never [practised] in the glass" (3.3.72) her various reactions for such moments. Bellinda admits that she has but says that in her glass she "could never yet agree what face [she] should make when they come blurt out with a nasty thing in a play" (3.3.76-8). She knows that "the men presently look upon the women, that's certain" (3.3.78-9) and therefore employs the hankie to protect herself. Although Vanbrugh's ladies are not seen in a playhouse during the course of *The Provok'd Wife*, their discussion of the theatrical gaze shows that women were more than aware of their own status as the objects of erotic scrutiny before the theatrical gaze. Moreover, it shows that they often enlisted each other's aid in protecting themselves from becoming its victims and because of this, were often at the mercy of each other.

Although Bellinda's hankie technique might seem original, women employing different methods to hide their reactions and manufacture an exterior facade was not. For many women, manufacturing this facade was absolutely necessary, even if its constructed nature was always known by someone else. Thomas Shadwell employs the vizard-mask in his 1678 *A True Widow* when he has Isabella, a young "Woman of Wit and Vertue" (*dram. pers.*), wear one to the theatre and get mistaken for a prostitute. *A True Widow* was first produced "probably in November or December, 1678" (Borgman 33) and unlike Shadwell's previous plays, was not a success. Leading up to this play's production, Shadwell's popularity had been fairly secure but Robert D. Hume notes that Shadwell "had little influence in the theatre between 1679 and 1688" (63), which may or may not have been a result of *A True Widow*'s failure to excite audiences. Regardless of its

popularity, the play is of particular import here as it is only the second Restoration play to feature women in a playhouse setting – and quite a few of them at that. Moreover, Shadwell presents the first Restoration play to feature female spectators witnessing an actual performance in a playhouse setting. The comedy is set in the Dorset Garden theatre and interestingly, is the same playhouse in which the 1678 audience witnessed the Duke’s Company performance of *A True Widow*. This brings special poignancy to the already self-reflexive nature of meta-theatre. The audience at Shadwell’s play would have seen the clear parallels between the “*Women-mask’d... Men of several sorts... Several young Coxcombs... [and] the Orange-Women*” (Shadwell 333) in the onstage audience and these types of spectators in their own audience. This “picturing of the typical theatrical audience” (Borgman 180) would have been fairly innovative for Restoration audiences.<sup>20</sup>

The overall plot of the play centres around Lady Cheatly, “a Widow lately come to Town who sets up for a great fortune, has taken a good House, and lives very splendidly... with intention to put off her self and two Daughters” (291). Having a limited fortune upon her arrival, she lies to project an image of wealth so that she and her daughters may marry well. Upon their arrival in London, Lady Cheatly enlists the aid of Maggot “a very busie old Gentleman, and very credulous, that loves to tell News, and always magnifies a true Story till it becomes a Lye” (299). By starting the rumour that she is wealthy, she is able to draw much more attention to herself and her daughters. Before long, Maggot is telling Bellamour and Stanmore that Lady Cheatly’s “daughters

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<sup>20</sup> In a statement that confirms my own research in this area, Borgman states that “I have been unable to find any particular episode in the printed drama of the years immediately preceding the production of *A True Widow* which Shadwell might have been imitating in this scene” (179). Shadwell’s meta-theatrical episode is the earliest example of a play-within a playhouse in Restoration drama.

will be worth ten Thousand pound apeice” (306), an opinion which almost everyone in the play believes to be true.

Owing to the intense scrutiny of the female spectator’s “outward appearances” in the playhouse (not to mention in public), it seems apt that Shadwell begins his play with an exchange between two of the main paramours regarding women’s clothing and comportment. Four acts before the characters enter the playhouse arena, Bellamour – Isabella’s love interest – associates women with vanity and false appearances. He notes that “the Women of this Town, if you don’t take care of your own outside, will never let you be acquainted with their insides” (289). This simple statement sets the tone for the play: women are vainly concerned with controlling their appearances and men are concerned with penetrating this vanity. As the play continues and the Steward blackmails Lady Cheatly into marrying him, Isabella becomes amorous of Bellamour, Gartrude falls for Selfish (and Stanmore), and Theodosia – “the Lady *Pleasant’s* Daughter” (309) – sets her sights on Carlos. Shadwell establishes each of these pairings before the characters go to the theatre which allows the playhouse politics of female sexuality to become foremost in each pair’s relationship.

As the characters enter the playhouse at the beginning of act four, the stage directions suggest that they do so in pairs: “Enter *Carlos, Theodosia... Bellamour, Isabella, Stanmore, Gartrude*” (s.d. 332). We quickly learn that even though they are coupled in the stage directions, the characters enter more as a large grouping. Bellamour and Stanmore are not even aware of Gartrude’s and Isabella’s presence alongside them. Isabella and Gartrude have disguised themselves, making their disguises known only to each other and Theodosia. Isabella has donned a vizard-mask so that she may “observe

*Bellamour's Actions*" (332) as she believes he "keeps a Player" (340) as a mistress. Gartrude has donned some of Isabella's clothing and notes how "Now no Body will know me; they'll take me for you in this Petticoat" (332). The sisters enlist each other and Theodosia in their economy of knowledge because as a group of young women attending a play, they are already aligned with each other. Their combined knowledge of these disguises shows how female networks would have allowed female spectators to better shape their own realities in the playhouse. But when Theodosia recommends that Isabella "pull off thy Mask, and conceal thy self no longer" (340), Shadwell also shows how female networks would have made women vulnerable to each other from their potential for exposure.

Shadwell gives a rather gritty meta-theatrical rendering of the Dorset Garden theatre. He shows the prostitutes – those "*Women mask'd*" (S.D. 333) – who operated throughout Restoration playhouses. He affords an anonymous orange-woman one line – "Oranges; Will you have any Oranges?" (333) – but fails to have any other character notice or engage her, allowing her instead to fade into the background. He shows the unruly nature of the playgoers who repeatedly refuse to pay the admission fee:

*Door-keep.* Pray, Sir, pay me, my Masters will make me pay it.

*3 Man.* Impudent Rascal! Do you ask me for Money? Take that, Sirrah.

*2 Door-keep.* Will you pay me, Sir?

*4 Man.* No: I don't intend to stay.

*2 Door-keep.* So you say every day and see two or three Acts for nothing.

*4 Man.* I'll break your Head, you Rascal.

He shows the audience's aggressive disdain for many playwrights and the "new way of Writing" (335), having one man declare a "Pox on the Coxcomb that writ it! there's nothing in't" (336). He does not hide these less savoury elements of playhouse life but instead shows the playhouse as a truly "wicked place" (341) to ensure that his portrayal is exaggerated enough to entertain his audience. Through these elements and the numerous fights that break out, Shadwell seemingly paints an accurate portrait of the late seventeenth-century playhouse and its rowdy atmosphere.

His meta-theatrical representation lends credibility to the rest of the playhouse scene, especially the female spectator's place therein. Many of the female alliances that unfold within the playhouse begin before the women step foot in the theatre. Isabella and Gartrude disguise themselves while dressing for the theatre at home, making their alliance in the playhouse an extension of their domestic alliance with each other. Gartrude is similarly aligned to Lady Busy in the playhouse following a scene which transpires before attending a play is even discussed. Lady Busy visits Lady Cheatly and her daughters in order to ascertain their marriageable situation. Lady Busy compliments the two girls, calling them "the prettiest Creatures in Town" and saying that she has "had several offers of Husbands for 'em" (302). The two women discuss Isabella's and Gartrude's potential futures and Lady Busy is the first to suggest their options outside of marriage. She notes that there is one Lord who is willing to pay "a Thousand pounds down, and three Hundred pour *per Annum* during life" (302) to keep Isabella as a mistress. Although Lady Cheatly seems open to the idea, she says that her daughter is "so perverse" that "she had rather Marry a Groom, than be Mistress to a Prince" (303). Lady Cheatly is disappointed that her daughter is unwilling to jeopardize her morals and

land herself a wealthy Lord by any means possible. Although Isabella disagrees with Lady Busy's suggestion, Gartrude admits that "Methinks her Ladyship speaks a great deal of Reason, she's a fine spoken Lady truly" (304). Unlike her sister, Gartrude believes that if she and her sister were to follow Lady Busy's advice, they "shall be all made" (305) and set in their futures.

Unfortunately for Gartrude, she misses one key part of Lady Busy's advice: the financial aspect. When Isabella and Gartrude enter the playhouse some two acts later, Gartrude quickly puts Lady Busy's idea into motion. She "*chuses to sit by Selfish*" (334) who she has earlier told Lady Brute is "the most gentile, well-bred Gentleman" (305), even though his name, and everything about him, prove otherwise. Before long, Selfish and Gartrude exit the scene, after which Selfish explains to Bellamore that he has just "enjoy'd the prettiest Creature... in a Room behind the Scenes" (342). She allows Selfish to enjoy her because she in part believes she is following Lady Busy's advice. Her reputation is even further compromised when she sleeps with Stanmore. Only two pages after sleeping with Selfish, she and Stanmore enter the scene and Stanmore tells her "I have us'd thee kindly, very kindly" (344). The dramatis personae lists Gartrude as "foolish and whorish" and from this playhouse scene alone, this seems an apt description of her. Shadwell has Gartrude sleep with both men in quick succession to show her as either "foolish" enough to mistake Lady Busy's suggestion or "whorish" enough to simply not care. Either way, she winds up at the mercy of Lady Busy and her mother, who she must enlist to save her reputation.

After initially framing her tryst with Stanmore as a forced situation, Gartrude later admits that "because you bid me be civil to him, I consented. I was afraid to anger you,

Madam” (344). Gartrude considers her sexual undoing in the playhouse a direct result of the earlier conversation between she, her mother and Lady Busy. They were the ones who encouraged her to be “civil” to land a wealthy Lord but now her mother is disgusted to find that she was “civil with a vengeance” without first ensuring that Stanmore “made [a] Settlement upon thee” (344). Following Gartrude’s confession, Lady Cheatly enlists Lady Busy to help sort out her daughters’ affairs. Being now twice deflowered within the playhouse walls, Gartrude is more at the mercy of these women than ever. Gartrude’s problems in the playhouse stem from a misunderstanding of an earlier private conversation between the women, showing how women’s private lives would have affected their public display in the theatre.

Aside from Gartrude’s undoing, Isabella also has her fair share of troubles in the playhouse walls. As noted earlier, she dons a vizard-mask for the performance so that she can spy on Bellamore. However, owing to the vizard-mask’s association with prostitution, it is not long before Isabella is mistaken for a prostitute. One playgoer suggests that “she earns all the Cloaths on her Back by lying on’t; some Punk lately turn’d out of Keeping, her Livery not quite worn out” (337). He assumes that her mask is new because she is a newly-turned prostitute and not because she is just a regular playgoer. In response, Isabella says “I deserve this by coming in a Masque” (337). Isabella has donned a mask in order to spy on her love interest. Unfortunately, by donning the mask she has also aligned herself with the prominent group of women in the playhouse operating as prostitutes. For Isabella, her alignment with these women is wholly unwelcome.



The play ends with a number of agreeable matches: Isabella marries Bellamore, Theodosia weds Carlos, and Gartrude is saved through a marriage to Young Maggot, much to her dismay. Even though Shadwell portrays the women as vulnerable to each other in the playhouse, their female alliances do manage to see them all happily coupled in the end. In this meta-theatrical episode, Shadwell uses the women's public display in the playhouse to further their private lives and reinforce those decisions made in the home. Isabella is already resolved to marry Bellamore but spies on him in the playhouse to ensure his loyalty. Gartrude mistakenly sleeps with two men thinking this is what her mother and Lady Busy were suggesting before they left for the play. Even Theodosia tests Carlos's loyalty to her when she demands that he never "see a Play but when [she is] there" and that he "must not talk with Vizors in the Pit" (330). Shadwell's use of the public realm to further the private lives of these women shows one more nuance that would have accompanied female play-going in Restoration London.

It is perhaps owing to *A True Widow's* failure to impress audiences that we do not see any more meta-theatrical female spectators until John Dennis's 1697 *A Plot, and No Plot*. Although Shadwell seems to portray the playhouse rather realistically, the nineteen-year span between the two plays suggests that audiences were not impressed with having playwrights present their theatrical situation back to them. When John Dennis does take up the playhouse, though, his portrayal falls in line with Shadwell's and D'Avenant's: his female spectators are in large numbers and they are at each other's mercy. Also, like Shadwell's women, they are able to use their situation in the playhouse to further their private lives. Pritchard explains that throughout the late seventeenth century "women were encouraged to make themselves legible by making themselves public and visible"

(33) despite the concurrent encouragement to keep themselves modest. Dennis creates this conflict between women's public and private display in the characters of Frowzy, Friskit and Sylvia. Whereas the prior two are eager to put themselves on display while at the playhouse in order to attract a handsome beau, Sylvia is more reserved and does not wish herself to become a spectacle before the theatrical gaze.

Dennis explains that in his play "the Action is one and intire, the incidents part of that Action." Centering around the household of one Bull Senior, the play chiefly concerns itself with the various plots and scams that Belvil employs to secure a marital union between himself and Sylvia. These two are Bull Senior's wards and very much in love but Bull Sr. has forbidden their marriage. As the play opens, we learn that Bull Sr. has arranged for both wards to be married off separately the following day – marrying both of them to partners they have never even met. He commands that Belvil will "see her no more [of Sylvia] till to morrow, when she and [his] son *Batt* are to be dispatch'd by the same Black-coat who is to do your business" (7-8). Following this opening exchange, the majority of the play's plot concerns itself with Belvil using the twenty-four hours before their impending marriages to trick his warden into allowing him to marry Sylvia – using the player Baldernoe in a variety of disguises as a main peon in his plans.

Although all of the play's action follows from this one romantic obstacle between herself and Belvil, Sylvia has barely any onstage time, notably except for in the playhouse scene. After Bull Sr. forbids the wards from seeing each other, Belvil enlists Baldernoe to see "what says the Charming Creature" (13) regarding their theatre attendance that day.

*Belv.* And will she meet me at the Play?

*Bald.* She says she will not: For her Guardian has commanded her not to come into your company, and therefore she thinks it her duty to tell you, that she intends to sit in the Stage-Box on the Right hand, that you may be sure to avoid that place.

*Belv.* A very odd way of making an Assigation! (13)

By telling him her exact intended seating location, it is clear that Sylvia does not actually wish Belvil to avoid her at the playhouse. She gives explicit instructions on where she will be sitting so that he may approach her against their guardian's wishes. Here, Sylvia intends for a conflation between the private and public spheres in the playhouse: she uses her public positioning in the playhouse to further her private position as a lover of Belvil.

Following this message, Belvil notes that it is time to depart for the playhouse as he has "promis'd to meet *Frowzy*... before the Play begins" (13). Belvil already knows *Frowzy*, "a Campaigning Bawd just arriv'd from *Flanders*" ("Persons") from his earlier travels and now plans to enlist her and her daughter in his plans to overcome his ward's decision in his marrying Sylvia. Act two opens to discover "*Frowzy, Friskit, Brush... at the Curtain*" (15), in front of which she has arranged to meet Belvil. Upon her arrival onstage, she asks her daughter to check her outward comportment: "Daughter, Prethee contemplate my Phiz a little: Hath it not a damnable hue with it?" (15). Her male attendant *Brush* is also there, with her brandy in tow, but she chooses to ask her daughter's opinion of how she looks in front of the theatrical gaze because they are both women and therefore aware of how they should look before it.

Both *Frowzy* and her daughter recognize their inherent visibility within the theatre and are thrilled to be on display. When her daughter suggests that *Frowzy* "step

into the Scene room” (16) to drink her brandy, Frowzy responds “For shame!” (16). She is all too happy to be seen by the audience and is not afraid to use whatever means possible to attract attention. At one point, she begins “*bowing to several in the Pit*” (18) and later tells Belvil that “You know I act for Glory” (19). Her infamy as a bawd in the army camps in Flanders has ensured that “he who writes the History of this War, will mention *Su Frowzy* with honour” (19). Her willing participation in and display before the theatrical gaze ensure that those in the playhouse will notice her, as well. Just as she examines how “the Bullies act in the Pit,” the other spectators recognize her as an “impudent Bawd” who lately has “arriv’d piping hot from *Flanders*” (17). She is not afraid to display herself before the gaze and performs accordingly.

There are instances, however, when Frowzy seems jealous of her daughter. She admits that “if I had but thy Youth, Child, I would lay a Tax of five hundred a year upon yonder limbo of Vanity” (17). She may want her daughter to get attention but not at the risk of being more popular than she is before the gaze. Friskit is equally worried that her mother is gaining more attention than she. Friskit asks “am I grown old or ugly that I stand unattack’d here? or am I neglected as an unfortify’d place, that lies open to all invaders?” (20). By framing herself as awaiting attack, she notes the harsh scrutiny that often characterized the theatrical gaze. By calling herself an unfortify’d place, she reflects her vulnerable position before it. When she decides to “put on [her] Mask” to “attract some Fop or other” (20), it is clear that Friskit wants to use her public exposure in order further her private self; she wishes to attract a suitor.

Once Friskit dons her mask, she is quickly mistaken for a prostitute. She aligns herself with the vizard-masked women of the theatre in order to get noticed but once

noticed, wishes for a different type of attention. A young beau, “one of those young wou’d-be-Sinners, whom we may call wicked Platonicks... who make leud love without desire” (20-1), approaches her immediately after she dons the mask. He propositions that they should “go aside and divert one another” (21) but Friskit responds that she is “too old for a Puppet-show” (21). While she initially plays along with his advances, she becomes angered when he suggests they “do business” (21). She may don a mask to be noticed but much like Isabella, Friskit draws the line at being mistaken for a prostitute. Upon her rejection of him, the young Beau considers that she “talks too well for a common Punk, and too leudly for a woman of Honour” and that “Ten to one [she is] some Actress who is rehearsing her part to me” (21). The Beau cannot believe that anyone so willing to put themselves on display within the theatre could be anything other than a performer. And, in many ways, he is right.

From their mutual desire to outshine the other, Frowzy and Friskit use each other to further their own gains. Dennis shows how their alignment with each other at the theatre is not overly beneficial to either of them. Dennis presents quite a different portrait of his other female spectator, Sylvia. Unlike Frowzy and Friskit, she is alone in her stage-box and does not have the immediate presence of other women to help her perform before the gaze. After initially telling Belvil to avoid her at the playhouse, she asks “for what weighty reason, Mr. *Belvil*, have you drawn me hither” (22) when he approaches her. When he responds that he has merely approached her so that he may “expose [his] Rival” (22) to her, she seems happy to see that he is jealous of Bull Jr. The two then engage in a lengthy conversation regarding their impending marriages and the nature of Bull Jr. She understands all too well that Bull Sr. has kept Bull Jr. away from her even

when she is designed to become his wife: “the longer you know his Son, the more nauseous you’ll find him” (22). While at the playhouse she is able to glimpse her husband for the first time and learn his true nature.

Bull Jr. enters the playhouse arena and approaches Belvil to enlist him in conversation. We learn that Bull Jr. is “just now come out of France” (24) and has “brought over with [him] about a bushel of Billet Doux, which [he] receiv’d from the Wives, and Sisters, and Daughters of Dukes and Peers in *France*” (25). While he and Belvil discuss his impending marriage to Sylvia, Sylvia sits in the stage-box quietly, avoiding any participation in the conversation or acknowledgment of who she is. She learns that Bull Jr. considers that “nothing can make a woman so abominable as wedlock, and all Wives are hideous alike” (28). She listens while he tells Belvil he has “resolve[d] to go to a Whore to night” so that he “might not be tempted to do so damn’d an unfashionable thing as to be immoderate with my own Spouse tomorrow night” (27). That Bull Jr. would keep such “unfashionable” sexual practices from his new bride reinforces the idea that without Sylvia’s anonymity in the Stage-box, she would most likely never get to know him so intimately. Her spectatorial position gains her sexual knowledge about her husband-to-be.

Sylvia becomes uncomfortable before the theatrical gaze once she and Belvil resume their conversation. After consenting to marry Belvil should he prevail in his designs, she says she “must think of removing: For so long a conversation in so publick a place has drawn all the Eyes of the Playhouse on us” (29). Alone in her stage-box, she does not have any women to help her stage herself before the gaze. She must therefore retreat from it altogether to avoid prolonging the erotic scrutiny she attracts. Although

she is able to remain anonymous to her future husband, her spectatorial anonymity is threatened as a lone female spectator. Dennis may separate Sylvia from Frowzy and Friskit but he makes sure that all of these women are in the playhouse at the same time. He successfully shows the petty rivalry and exploitation that could accompany women's communal play-going as well as the inability to hide from the theatrical gaze when a woman was alone at the theatre. Through all of this, he shows how women were able to use their public display to further their private lives and how women were always in a vulnerable position at the theatre, regardless of their company.

Overall, Dennis's playhouse scene is much quieter than Shadwell's and D'Avenant's. Even though Sylvia gleans sexual knowledge about her future husband, Friskit gets mistaken for a prostitute and Frowzy makes no secret of how much she loves brandy, Dennis allows the playhouse politics to fall on the shoulders of his main female spectators and not on the rowdy audience and busy action surrounding. He follows in Shadwell's meta-theatrical footsteps by showing that women helped to create each other's spectatorial realities but were not immune from being used by each other to further their own personal ends. In many ways, the late seventeenth-century playhouse was the perfect venue for this. Jean Marsden has suggested that once the spectacle of the actress appeared regularly onstage, female spectatorship became "another occasion for the commodification of women, this time staged by the woman herself" (*Fatal* 56). Inside the playhouse, women were forced to perform and often did so willingly. Their performances often began before they reached the theatre and continued once inside usually with the help of other women, masks and disguises. As women were integral in each other's private lives, it is unsurprising that they became integral in attaining privacy

for each other within the public space of the theatre, as well. Because of these performances and the intimacy evoked between the women, however, the late seventeenth-century female spectator was at once able to exploit those women around her, all the while being exploited from numerous ends herself.



## Conclusion

From the public to the private stage and back, women's role in each others' spectatorial position throughout the seventeenth century depended on an extension of their roles in each other's private lives into the public realm. Outside the theatre, women used each other to cloak their embodiment within the more closeted recesses of the home. Inside the theatre, women were able to tap into this female network in order to capture privacy within the multiple and intersecting lines of sight of the playhouse. They were able to use each other as a means of controlling their inherent visibility before the gaze, especially in those moments that called for a modicum of privacy. Renaissance female spectators realized that the more women present, the greater their spectatorial ease. During the middle part of the century, women recognized that their mutual involvement in the theatre could be a tool in resisting patriarchy. As the Restoration female spectator became more and more dependent on other women shaping her performance before the theatrical gaze, she became even more vulnerable to these women. By the end of the century, women had the ability to expose each other in a venue wherein they were already the main spectacle and spectating with the fear of constant exposure.

Throughout each chapter, I have shown how this female network had the potential to alleviate much of the threat that the theatre posed to a female spectator's sexual modesty. I have also shown how women were often at the mercy of one another's presence at the theatre, especially as the century continued and the actress took to the public stage. Contemporary theatrical and cinematic experience has evolved considerably since the seventeenth century but then, as now, "for the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image – she *is* the image" (Doane 135). Just as the

female body became the centre of the theatrical spectacle during the Restoration, it is still the centre of many theatrical spectacles being produced and commercialized today.

Cynthia Lowenthal rightly notes the connection between the female body as spectacle in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries: “the notion of the self as an image is a particularly modern one that contemporary theorists located within ‘a society of the spectacle,’ but upon examination these kinds of cultures reveal themselves to have roots deep in the early modern era” (21). From the numerous measures women employed to keep themselves from becoming a spectacle before the seventeenth-century theatrical gaze, it is clear that women were all too aware of their spectatorial position *as* spectacles. And from the ways in which their status as spectacles grew alongside their spectatorial vulnerability, it is clear that the vulnerability between women in the theatre has deep roots in the progression of the commercial theatre in the seventeenth century.

When I step into that restroom queue, I am conscious that each woman who waits alongside me has the ability to expose me before the theatrical gaze. Each fellow female spectator who hears me in my stall could return to the auditorium and announce my most embodied experience before the theatrical public, thereby breaking my unconscious theatrical performance. Just as women are still bound in a collective speech act of silence with each other at the theatre, we all have the ability to break that silence, to end the performance, and to expose the unspoken gulf between reality and spectacle that accompanies any theatre-going experience. Our ability to expose each other in such a performative setting means that then, as now, we are still at each other’s mercy. Our vulnerability to each other in the public space of the theatre continues and with it, so do our individual performances.

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