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The volume grew out of a Shakespeare Association of America seminar “Women Players in and Around Shakespeare”, held in 2000, which was intended to bring to light “the relatively hidden tradition of female performance” (Ann Thompson, 103) in early modern England. Given the fact that women were never members of professional troupes, the fourteen essays by renowned scholars offer evidence that they nevertheless appeared as players in a variety of fields at all levels of society, thereby challenging the assumption of an all-male stage in England between 1500 and 1660.

Throughout the volume, the terms ‘player’ and ‘performance’ are used in ways largely ignored in discussions of early modern theatre history that focus exclusively on ‘official’ theatrical performance at court or on the London public stages. The essays concentrate instead on areas in which women appeared as ‘players’ in a wider sense of the word: Queens, aristocrats and gentlewomen who danced, sang, and recited in masques, plays, and court entertainments; non-elite women within their communities who took on roles in parish drama and festive pageantry; Italian prima donnas, acrobats and French actresses who came to England to perform; and poorer women who worked as itinerant entertainers, ballad singers and mountebanks. The extensive term ‘player’ is used to differentiate these mimetic activities from the narrow term ‘actress’, a concept closely connected with Restoration drama, where it carries overtones of sexual titillation by the very femininity of the performer. Instead, ‘player’ (a term also used for the male actor) is intended to include performers in any act of embodied display or representation intended for an audience. The time frame of 1500-1660 is chosen to stress the connection between late medieval and traditional modes of playing and the new public stages as well as the court masques of the Jacobean and Caroline court.

The volume lays claim to the fact that cultural knowledge about female playing was wide-spread in early modern England (and Europe). Contemporary negative reactions to women players who were condemned as unnatural and lascivious and as ‘whores’, as well as the fact that a few aristocratic women took the female player as a model in staging their own identities (Queen Henrietta Maria, Queen Anne and her ladies) are read as proof of the widespread occurrence of performing females.

The first section, programmatically called “Beyond London”, includes essays by James Stokes, Alison Findlay, Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, and Gweno Williams. These critics base their research on the county records published in the REED (Records of Early English Drama) volumes and argue not only for the inclusion of the popular and local entertainments in which women played major roles, but also for the
inclusion of areas such as Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Gloucestershire. James Stokes demonstrates that women who held prominent positions within the guilds also participated in the plays, pageants and other entertainments that the guilds sponsored. Findlay, Hodgson-Wright and Williams compare women’s opportunities for performance across county divides, discovering astonishing connections between religious affiliations as well as relative proximity to the central government and the extent of women’s involvement in performances such as the Corpus Christi plays. Whereas in Lancashire women’s participation in parish drama might have been due to Catholic sympathies, the Puritan and parliamentarian influence in Gloucestershire rather hindered female performance. Throughout, the authors consider the possibility of female involvement also in cases were evidence is lacking, as the absence of information does not necessarily mean non-participation.

Section II of the volume (“Beyond Elites”) focuses on women performers outside the aristocratic levels of society, such as pawnbrokers and mountebanks, who used performance to sell their goods. In a highly illuminating article Natasha Korda interprets Moll Frith, the ‘roaring girl’ of Middleton and Dekker’s play, not merely as an exceptional celebrity who played her lute and sang on the stage of the Fortune theatre in 1612, but puts her in the context of widespread female activity as dealers and brokers of stolen and second-hand goods. Korda discovers an uncanny resemblance between the abilities of these women, such as flexibility and deceit, and the very function of the theatre, and she interprets Frith’s appearance on the Fortune stage as a publicity stunt that helped refashion her public persona from that of a cutpurse to that of a more socially respectable broker of goods. Bella Mirabella also explores the world of performative commerce, tracing the history of the female mountebanks who played instruments, sang and performed skits, which gave them an authority that was resented especially by their male competitors. This often led to a demonization as frauds and whores that was much stronger than the more general attacks against mountebanks.

The next section of the volume, "Beyond the Channel", assesses the history of female playing on the Continent and its effect on the theatrical practices of English playwrights, audiences, artists and courtiers. Connections between English and continental theatre are explained to have been forged through touring English players as well as by travelling aristocrats and merchants, professional actresses of the *commedia dell’arte* performing in England as well as foreign queens such as Anne and Henrietta Maria, who brought traditions of female performance from abroad. M. A. Katritzky interprets a wide variety of visual material such as drawings, paintings and engravings showing women posing as 'innamorata', courtesan, servant, gypsy or exotic Turkish girl which can be partly regarded as portraits depicting actresses, such as the famous Isabella Andreini.

That an awareness of female performers was wide-spread gains conviction through the fact that Shakespeare increasingly created demanding female roles in his plays. Julie Campbell analyses Shakespeare’s play *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, discovering intricate layers of allusion to female performance in France and Italy that includes the skills of the ‘innamorata’ as well as inter-gender debates that could be...
read as direct allusion to Isabella Andreini. Another essay by Rachel Poulson also explores the relationship between Shakespeare’s comedy and its Italian ‘sources’. The often explicit treatment of homoerotic desire and sexual acts between women in Italian comedies is revealed to re-emerge in the sexually charged relationship between the characters (such as Viola and Olivia) in *Twelfth Night*. Even though Shakespeare’s play was to be performed by boys, this did not mean a complete erasure of lesbian overtones that characterised his Italian models. The close connection between English and French/Italian performance traditions is also analysed by Melinda Gough who places Queen Henrietta Maria (wife of Charles I) within the traditions at the French court, which were characterised by the contact with Italian troupes and their actresses.

Part IV of the volume, entitled “Beyond the Stage”, includes an essay by Peter Parolin, who demonstrates how Aletheia Talbot, the Countess of Arundel, staged herself as an innocent wronged in a scandal played out before the Venetian authorities. Charged with abetting a traitor, she used techniques she had learned through participation in the masques with Queen Anna at the English court as well as through her acquaintance with Italian commedia actresses, and thereby managed to redirect the accusation from herself to the Venetian Ambassador. Julie Crawford in her essay on Margaret Cavendish reveals how another aristocratic woman used her writerly skills at self-fashioning for political ends, namely regaining the fortune and status her husband had lost in supporting King Charles. Her plays as well as her public self-presentations in the country and at the court were intended to restore her rights and the respect she regarded as due to herself and her husband.

The final section of the volume, “Beyond the ‘All-Male”, deals with the imitation of female voices and body language by male actors and its impact on women players and spectators. Jean Howard shows how male impersonations of women ‘quote’ an array of codes of femininity that evoke their bodies, voices and postures. In her interpretation of Haywood’s *If You Know Not me, You Know Nobody*, Part I, Queen Elizabeth was represented through dress, cosmetics, and verbal conventions not merely as a queen, but also as a gendered being. Interestingly, Howard argues that these ‘citations’ of femininity are not necessarily to be regarded as travesties, but can bring women’s history, materiality and agency onto the stage while excluding their bodies. Bruce Smith similarly interprets ballad singing as another element in the discursive ‘citation’ of femininity. Not only was ballad singing practised quite often by women, but music was also seen as effeminising. Smith compares oral and printed versions of three early modern ballads, tracing the gendering of the female body through the evocation of their bodily parts (hands, knee, bosom, mouth). The construction of virtual women by song is seen as a ‘citation’ of real women, thereby blurring the difference of the (performing) men and (performed) women. Pamela Brown in the last essay of the volume traces the culture of jesting by the example of the house of a powerful royalist family in Norfolk. Many jests recorded in the manuscript of Sir Nicholas Le Strange she analyses were told by female relatives and friends, or concern women performing physical or verbal tricks of sometimes explicitly sexual and
scatological content. Brown therefore emphasises the involvement of early modern noblewomen in a culture of jesting that foregrounded their skills as performers.

The richness and variety of this collection make it a valuable contribution to women’s studies as well as to theatre studies of the European Renaissance and beyond. Throughout, the essays carefully avoid the pitfalls of either overestimating the women’s role or underestimating their presence in the minds of contemporary audiences. By synthesising areas such as *commedia dell’arte*, lower-class commercial activities and aristocratic engagement in performance, they lay the foundation for future research on the position of women within the social and theatrical developments of early modernity.

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