

James Shirley's comic women: a preliminary investigation

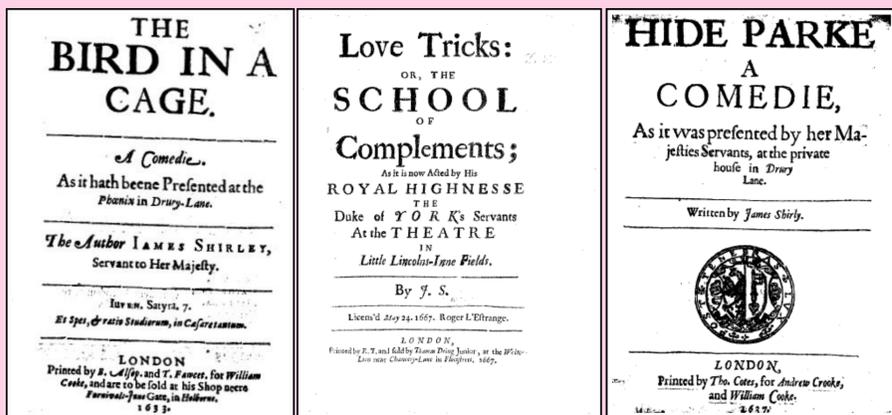
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1. Introduction

The Caroline playwright **James Shirley** (1596-1666) is often believed to have been ahead of his time in his presentation of women, and especially in his attitude towards **females who perform**. Through a detailed study of his **comedies**, in particular *The Bird in a Cage*, *Love Tricks* and *Hyde Park* (below), all of which feature theatrical female characters, this project aimed to investigate how far Shirley really condoned histrionic women.

Previous scholarship, for example Kim Walker's discussion of *The Bird in a Cage*, has identified an **ambivalence** in Shirley's treatment of thespian females: she argues that, in this play, he made an **"uneasy attempt"** to ratify the woman player. However, my research has indicated that Shirley's attempted ratification of female performance and his uneasiness about it were not conflicting forces but surprisingly **complemented** one another.



2. "Women actors, notorious whores": the social and religious context

In 1632, just months before the Queen consort, Henrietta Maria, would play in Walter Montagu's *The Shepherds' Paradise* (an exclusively female court entertainment complete with female speaking parts and women in men's attire) the Puritan lawyer William Prynne (left) had his critique of the theatre, *Histriomastix*, published. Famously, his index included a reference to "women actors" alongside the epithet "notorious whores" which was construed as a direct critique of the Queen's theatricality and the rehearsals for her pastoral play. As a result, Prynne was imprisoned in the Tower and had his ears cut off. This controversy was frequently documented in the work of contemporary dramatists. Shirley's *The Bird in a Cage* was published in 1633 with a mock dedication to Prynne, congratulating him on his "happy Retirement".

3. "Conflict in minds": the marriage of criticism and devotion

Some commentators, such as Hero Chalmers and Sophie Tomlinson, have noted that Shirley's attitude towards women players seems to waver between allegiance to his theatrical patroness, Henrietta Maria, and "a muted echo of Prynne's paranoia" due to his location within the dominant ideological thought patterns of his patriarchal society. His simultaneous endorsement of and aversion to female performance could be attributed to:

- his commitment to hierarchy, and the consequent confusion caused by a conflict of patriarchal hierarchy and social hierarchy (Henrietta was both a woman and a Queen), or
- a shrewd balancing of social comment (designed to make the audience of the commercial theatres laugh) and reverence to the royal family, or
- a phenomenon Martin Butler has identified as the Caroline "conflict in minds".

What was the "conflict in minds"?

- In the 1630s, many were trying to find harmony between fierce devotion to the King and fierce criticism of him.
- This was not only because they wished to protect themselves from the consequences of royal displeasure.
- Many were genuinely torn between adulation for the King and criticism of his policies (e.g. Ship Money).
- For example, John Bastwick, despite being imprisoned in the Tower in 1637, wrote: "I would rather live with bread and water under [Charles's] regiment, than in all plenty under any Prince in the world".

However, my research suggested that Shirley's 'ambivalence' was actually a carefully-calculated technique to contain theatrical women...

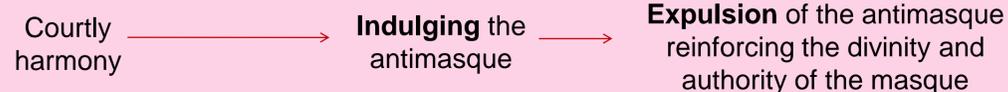
4. "Deject, advance, undo, create again": a philosophy of containment

"[It] holds in aw
 By giving hand a little"
 – Samuel Daniel on equity

C.L. Barber's model for the structure of Elizabethan festival:



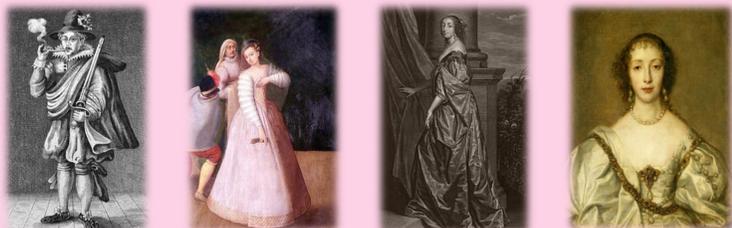
Use of the Stuart court antimasque:



Shirley's treatment of histrionic women seems, like the court antimasque and Renaissance holidays, to be a project of containment via allowance. Their appearance in his plays is "a 'misrule' which implie[s] rule", to quote C.L. Barber's description of Elizabethan festival. Shirley allows a provocative amount of representation of theatrical women in order the better to contain them. *Hyde Park's* Fairfield asserts, "What women are forbidden / they're mad to execute", and Shirley attempts to mollify such militancy by "giving hand a little". He ultimately banishes, undermines, suppresses, overwrites or recuperates for patriarchy the theatrical females he seems initially to present sympathetically.

How Shirley ultimately dispels the woman actor by first bringing her to life:

- He frames her within a festive structure of exceptionality and ephemerality.
- He authorizes her performances by presenting them as girlish "tricks and trillabubs".
- He presents exceptions to prove the rule: female paragons of virtue are not evidence of Shirley's sympathy for women but actually a foil to make more conspicuous the wantonness of other females by comparison.
- He accentuates the theatrical frame in order to appropriate subversive female playing for maximum entertainment value but minimum social threat.
- He emphasizes the silent eloquence – the mute rhetoric – of the female body, only to deny the presence of that female body onstage (his female characters would have been played by transvestite boy-players).



Above: Some female theatricals who a Caroline audience would have been fully aware of. (L-R: Mary 'Moll' Frith; Italian actress Isabella Andreini; Countess of Carlisle, Lucy Hay; Queen Henrietta Maria).

5. "Quacking Delilahs": male anxieties about female performers

The perceived need for women to be *couverte* since their bodies were naturally "unfinished" and lacked clearly defined boundaries from the outside world.

The perceived threat of emasculation by "alluring the audiorie to effeminacie" or undermining man's god-given sovereignty over language.

The danger of encouraging female spectators to resist gendered authority outside the bounds of the theatrical space.

The unhealthy advertisement of marital insubordination or reproductive ineligibility onstage.

6. The potency of negation

However, Shirley's attempts to ultimately deny the theatrical female could be subverted into an empowering absence. The conspicuous non-appearance of women onstage would have been potent in itself.

1. **The eloquence of withdrawal and rejection:** during the Interregnum, royalist writers often converted forced withdrawal into voluntary self-assertion to affirm their commitment to the King. Also, at the Stuart court, the refusal to dance in public was a puissant performance of denial which allowed women to turn absence into assertion. Like Bonamico's invisible "hand" in *The Bird in a Cage*, sometimes drawing attention to what is *not* there can be more powerful than overt display.
2. **Spectators brought an enormous cultural knowledge of the female player to the all-male stage:** a Caroline audience would be aware of contemporary female performers such as courtly masquers, touring Italian commedia actresses, and those performing in festive rituals. The boy-player would not, then, have vanished to consciousness but would have made conspicuous the actress's absence.