

Introduction: Gender, Cultural Mobility, and Theater History Inquiry

MELINDA J. GOUGH, *McMaster University*
CLARE MCMANUS, *University of Roehampton*

This series of essays takes as its central focus female theatrical agency in early modern Europe across linguistic and geographic borders, both at the heart of commercial theater in capital cities and in less frequently studied settings such as the convent, the court, and the salon. The four essays that make up this special section address women players, theater managers, and playwrights in Italy, Spain, France, and Bavaria, with a particular eye to their circulation of novel theatrical materials, forms, and practices within and across national theater traditions. These essays discuss mixed-gender as well as single-sex female troupes and consider their imbrication with cross-gender casting involving male actors both on the “all-male English stage” and on the continent.

Conversation among contributors to this special section began with a 2015 Modern Language Association (MLA) roundtable on “Worldly Women: Cosmopolitanism and Transnational Female Performance in Early Modern Europe,” sponsored by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women. The organizers of this session, Melinda Gough and Pamela Allen Brown, opted for a roundtable format with two main goals in mind. First, a typical conference panel structure would limit the session to three speakers, whereas a roundtable would accommodate a larger number of scholars representing fields usually kept separate, thanks to disciplinary distinctions established on the basis of linguistic or geographic focus. Second, the roundtable format would help to facilitate greater cross talk among speakers so that the particular expertise of each participant might be better harnessed toward new, collectively generated insights regarding early modern women’s theatrical participation, agency, resiliency, and movement. During the months that preceded our session, the task of generating “key

questions” arising out of individual participants’ areas of research interest led to lively e-mail conversations. The MLA session in Vancouver facilitated yet further back-and-forth, discussion that incorporated the queries and insights of the roundtable audience as well. In hopes of extending the energy generated by these previous conversations to a yet wider audience—*Renaissance Drama*’s readership—the essays in this special section expand significantly on the brief talking points that each contributor shared during the conference itself and begin to map a set of methodological and conceptual paradigms that we hope will inform and inspire future comparative work on women and theater across early modern Europe and beyond.

The case studies in women and performance gathered in this special section demonstrate the importance of understanding particular instances of female theatrical mobility in their own right; they can also help to better inform our understanding of particular national theater histories across Europe. In the case of early modern English theater history, some of this work has already begun, in part thanks to sustained initiatives by scholars associated with the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project. Given their work, the historiography of medieval and early modern English theater can no longer so easily limit itself, without question, to the London commercial playhouse, yet we are only just beginning to explore women’s participation in English theatrical activity as it is thus redefined. The work in this special section demonstrates a yet further expanded range of attention: Caroline Bicks analyzes convent and school performances, Pamela Allen Brown discusses the touring of Italian companies across the European continent, Perry Gethner and Melinda Gough set French commercial drama against the context of salon and court performance, and María M. Carrión examines a broadened definition of women’s theatrical participation in Spain as both actresses and *autoras* (managers of theater companies). Collectively, the essays offered by our contributors implicitly extend our notion of “Renaissance Drama” (this journal’s title) in temporal, geographic, and generic or formal terms.

They do so partly by casting light on structures of thought that have often excluded women’s performance from scholarly consideration. In particular, this special section’s focus on the intersection of gender with transnational mobility reveals three larger paradigms of exclusion within the field of early modern theater history: geographical exclusions, as when plays and theater practices associated with one particular country are taken up without considering possible intersections with traditions that developed in neighboring regions; temporal exclusions involving a narrowed focus on one particular subperiod (e.g., the late Elizabethan or early Jacobean period in English theater history) rather than the early modern period as a whole; and formal or generic exclusions, as when, for example, the drama of the commercial Parisian playhouses is read in isolation

rather than within the broader context of theatrical forms that developed in other settings such as salons or royal courts.

In geographical terms, studies of early modern theater history have often constructed a metonymic relationship between the commercial stage in a given country's capital city and the nation. This relationship in turn often serves to marginalize the foreign and the feminine. In his afterword to this special section, Stephen Orgel returns to the much-cited anecdote of the "pippen-pelted" French actresses who played at the Blackfriars Theatre in London in 1629—a pivotal event for narratives of early modern women's theatricality. Looking again at the letter detailing the alleged reception these actresses received—previously thought to be by Thomas Brande but now revealed as a Collier forgery—Orgel notes that the company "played several times at London public theaters without incident" and concludes that, rather than early modern London audiences, "it is only theater history that finds this inconceivable."¹ The previous use of this anecdote by theater historians, just as much as its initial counterfeiting, illuminates conceptual connections between gender and nation and the ways in which the policing of national boundaries and borders by means of gender hierarchies can facilitate a further denial of the cross-cultural mobility inherent in early modern theater. So, to present these French actresses as having been "hissed out of London," as Allardyce Nicoll does, is to shape a further rhetorical expulsion around the intersection of gender with cultural and geographical difference.² This particular instance of placing barriers around the early modern London stage to contain the mobility and reach of continental theater demonstrates how continental performance traditions are so often hived off from narratives of English theater more generally.

By focusing on the transnational, the mobile, and the noncanonical together with instances of women's performance, the essays in this special section pose a concerted challenge to isolationist theater history scholarship of this type. They also question conventional models of periodization. In this, they build on insights articulated by James Stokes. Drawing on records uncovered in his work for the REED archival project in Somerset, Lincolnshire, and Suffolk, Stokes assesses the evidence of widespread women's theatrical participation through-

1. Stephen Orgel, "Afterword," *Renaissance Drama*, in this issue.

2. Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama: An Historical Survey from the Beginnings to the Present Time* (London: George C. Harrap, 1925), 221. For further discussion, see Clare McManus, "Women and English Renaissance Drama: Making and Unmaking 'The All-Male Stage,'" *Literature Compass* 4, no. 3 (2007): 784–96, esp. 790–92. In light of scholarship published over the past decade, this essay should be read alongside more recent work: see, for instance, Sophie Tomlinson's consideration of the use of "actress" in 1608, in "The Actress and Baroque Aesthetic Effects in Renaissance Drama," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2015): 67–82.

out the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and identifies what he calls, with reference to the religious guilds of Lincoln, “universal cultural suffrage” in the early to mid-sixteenth century. This he finds falling away after the Reformation in the face of a “relentless official assault on traditional culture” and in particular on “women as unfettered participants in that culture” in what he later calls a “culture war” against women’s performance.³ Stokes’s findings implicitly situate the all-male commercial stages of the English “high Renaissance” as belonging not to a theatrical golden age but instead to an interregnum of women’s performance, after which the emergence of the Restoration professional female actor is, in his words, “more a denouement than a mystery.”⁴ The essays in this special section, combined, take us a step further in the direction that Stokes points us toward, moving beyond the usual temporal coverage of Renaissance or Shakespearean drama to include case studies of mixed-gender troupes in France and Italy in the 1540s through to convent plays acted by English girls and women on the continent in the later seventeenth and into the eighteenth century.

Even though women’s theatrical activity flourished outside the commercial playing companies, moreover, the canons of early modern national performance traditions remain tightly constrained: only specific forms of playing in certain locations have received sustained attention.⁵ The metonymic construction of the London stage as representative of city and nation, for example, in which the male players of the London playhouse companies become representative of English theater per se, excludes other performance modes (e.g., court masquing or school plays) and participants (e.g., singers, pageant performers, dancers, acrobats) to enforce a focus on canonical performance forms. This process, and the related intersection of periodicity with form, are forcefully evident in the broader cultural presentation of theater history and women’s place within it. Hence, in 2011–12, London’s National Portrait Gallery held an exhibition on the women of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English stage called *The First Actresses: Nell Gwynn to Sarah Siddons*. The exhibition’s title assumes that the

3. James Stokes, “Women and Performance: Evidences of Universal Cultural Suffrage in Medieval and Early Modern Lincolnshire,” in *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 25–43, at 28, 41.

4. James Stokes, “The Ongoing Exploration of Women and Performance in Early Modern England: Evidences, Issues, and Questions,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2015): 9–31, at 28.

5. “After more than three decades of activity, archival research continues to produce copious evidence that, with the exception of professional English troupes during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, women participated as performers and patrons at every level of society during the medieval and early modern periods . . . the universal presence of women performers in pre-Reformist English culture, their absence from troupes and the tendency to consign them to something called ‘traditional culture’ has encouraged the view that women’s performance was marginal” (ibid., 9). See also James Stokes, “Women and Performance in Medieval and Early Modern Suffolk,” *Early Theatre* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–43.

theatrical women of the previous two centuries, those who took part in civic pageants, court masques, or early forms of opera like Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes* (1656), for instance, cannot fully be considered actresses. And yet, the relationship of "firsts" to the history of women's theatricality has already been eloquently critiqued by Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, who, in the introduction to their important volume of collected essays deconstruct various milestones of foreign, amateur, traditional, and religious women's performance and so query a conventional periodization that marginalizes women's performance by keeping it separate from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.⁶ In 2016, the British Library's exhibition *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* takes an equally complex stance: focusing on the first recorded performance of a woman in a Shakespearean role, the moment in December 1660 when an actress (most likely Anne Marshall) took the part of Desdemona in the Vere Street theater, the exhibition contextualizes this event against the staging of the elite Jacobean female body in Jonson's *Masque of Queens* and the theatricality of Mary Frith's social cross-dressing and its translation into Middleton and Dekker's *Roaring Girl* (1611).⁷ In so doing, *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* offers a refreshed version of early modern English theater history that recognizes a greater breadth of women's theatrical activities.

This recognition continues to spur on important archival study dedicated to uncovering additional instances of women's theatricality during the early modern period. But the essays in this special section also point to the need for more clear-sighted readings of this archival evidence in relation to questions of women's cultural agency. To more fully explore such questions, it is useful to think through Dympna Callaghan's resonant category of "excluded participants," outlined in her introduction to *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, together with Kathryn Schwarz's discussion of women's "willful compliance" in her book *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space*.⁸ Callaghan's concept of the "excluded participant" calls us to begin mapping a "valuably complex, nuanced picture of women's simultaneous participation in and exclusion from early modern culture."⁹ Eloquently describing the meth-

6. Brown and Parolin, "Introduction," in *Women Players*, 1–24, esp. 3–4.

7. For more on the December 1660 performance of *Othello* and the play's role in the history of women's performance, see Clare McManus, "The Vere Street Desdemona: *Othello* and the Theatrical Englishwoman, 1602–1660," in *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception and Performance*, ed. Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin, and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 221–31.

8. Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction," in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–29, at 7; Kathryn Schwarz, *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

9. Callaghan, "Introduction," 7.

odological acrobatics that result from attempts to suggest that women's performance somehow resolved or obviated the constraints of patriarchy, her critique offers an important corrective to revisionist views of female theatricality. Pointing out that women did not clamor for space on a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English stage that was generally perceived as disreputable, Callaghan proposes instead the category of the "excluded participant," which, as Clare McManus has noted elsewhere, "describes women's standing within an early modern social hierarchy that certainly required their presence and their participation yet undeniably necessitated their subjection—but not all at once and not all in the same way."¹⁰ In Peter Parolin's words, the "excluded participant" category highlights the importance of women's "creative contestation" in their negotiation of "the conditions of women's access to culture, the restrictions under which they laboured, and the uses they made of their opportunities to perform."¹¹ This notion usefully sits alongside Kathryn Schwarz's definition of women's conformity to the expectations of patriarchy as "willful compliance," a concept which she sees as a "mandate for [women's] purposeful acts" and a "hazardous cure" for the risky "stasis" that threatens "isolated masculine privilege."¹² In this model, virtue and conformity themselves are freighted, dependent on female will and consent. Virtue, as Caroline Bicks's essay on the career of Mary Ward shows, can lead women to wander and perform. Virtue can also lead a woman like Isabella Andreini—whose death in France, as Perry Gethner and Melinda Gough note in their essay, was mourned by that country's court—to distinguish herself from common piazza performers by fashioning herself as the published author of verse and pastorals (see Pamela Allen Brown's essay in this special section). In the case of the Spanish actresses, as discussed by María M. Carrión, Schwarz's model of "wilful compliance" perhaps helps to explain why the legal instruments of patriarchy were the means for their activities to be banned but also the means by which these *farsantas* succeeded in having their playing reinstated. As these case studies suggest, agency and conformity are far from binary opposites. The examples of agency found in this special section's contributions on women's performance constitute complex negotiations of boundaries and constraints—whether or not these limitations are contested by the women involved.

By means of such negotiations, women often played an active role in shaping what kinds of plays got written and performed. The rise of the Italian

10. Clare McManus, "Early Modern Women's Performance: Towards a New History of Early Modern Theater?" *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009): 161–77.

11. Peter Parolin, "Introduction: Access and Contestation: Women's Performance in Early Modern England, Italy, France, and Spain," *Early Theatre* 15, no. 1 (2012): 15–25, at 18, 20.

12. Schwarz, *What You Will*, 6, 2, 9.

virtuosic actress, for example, enabled itinerant mixed-gender troupes to successfully diversify their offerings so that these included not only farce and tumbling but also comedy, pastoral, and tragedy, as Brown's essay shows. On the Paris commercial stage, too, the arrival of women players "had a major impact on the types of plays performed,"¹³ according to Gethner and Gough: writing for mixed-gender troupes, early seventeenth-century playwrights such as Alexandre Hardy turned to tragicomedy and pastoral (with the love plots that proved central to these genres); women helped to shape private dramatic performance through their participation in salons, where theatricals were sometimes staged and where a new genre—the proverb comedy—emerged as early as the 1640s; Racine's plays came to centre around complex, fully rounded protagonists such as *Berénice* and *Phèdre* thanks to the exceptional talents of *la Champmeslé* (née Marie Desmares), the lead actress of the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* troupe during the 1670s; and new types of secondary roles for women such as the *confidente* and the *soubrette* came to prominence as well, perhaps influenced by secondary female roles in the *commedia dell'arte* such as that of *Francescina*, perhaps merely because troupes in France now regularly employed actresses.

A focus on transnational women's mobility in early modern theater, these examples show, thus prompts the interrogation of both canonical and non-canonical plays within given national institutions by bringing to the fore questions of the ways that such plays cannot really be understood without taking female impact into account. What's more, in moving beyond the identification of moments of direct contact—those moments when practitioners and audiences of various national traditions explicitly encounter one other—the work of our special section's contributors encourages new methodological paradigms regarding how we approach women's performance.¹⁴ As a case in point, we might consider a scene at the heart of the English canon: the Willow Song scene of *Othello* 4.3. In this scene, high Shakespearean tragedy bears the indirect traces of Italian *commedia* actresses and courtly women singers.¹⁵ Contact between English and Italian theater is certainly evident in *Othello*: in addition to Shakespeare's reworking of *Cinthio* and the play's reworking of stock *commedia* types, scholars of Italian theater have long pointed to English audiences' exposure to Italian theatrical practice and, on occasion, actresses themselves, as in one tour to London in

13. Perry Gethner and Melinda Gough, "The Advent of Women Players and Playwrights in Early Modern France," *Renaissance Drama*, in this issue.

14. Julia Prest considers similar questions in her exploration of seventeenth-century French comedy's continued use of cross-gender casting side by side with the introduction of women players; see chap. 1 of her *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* (New York and Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11–42.

15. Clare McManus, "'Sing It Like Poor Barbary': *Othello* and Early Modern Women's Performance," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2015): 99–120.

the 1570s.¹⁶ But this model can also be supplemented by a focus on shared structures and scenarios—in this case, the figure of the lamenting abandoned woman. Here, Rachel Poulsen’s allusively flexible concept of the “actress effect” and its focus on the ways that English theater holds the capacity to transform the idea and reputation of the Italian actress, comes into play. In her analysis of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Poulsen argues that “the fame (and notoriety) of Italian actresses proved irresistible to English playwrights, many of whose works exhibit a kind of ‘actress effect’ that, rather than inhering in a single character, explored the limits of female behavior and charisma in terms both admiring and critical.”¹⁷ This “effect”—a conjuring of the idea and practice of the actress through the charisma and technique of the English boy actor—can certainly be traced to direct contact between the English and European stages, but it also allows for a different paradigm, based on celebrity and on the circulation of shared theatergrams, that is, scenarios and tropes. Hence, the methodological exercise becomes less a process of identifying direct connections, with the ever-present risk of exceptionality, and more a process of unpacking the effects created by the English boy and of attending to the permeating influence of women on the stage regardless of whether they are bodily there or not. Shaping an idea of theater as emulative and mobile and a particular strand of female characterization as virtuosic and changeable, Poulsen’s notion of the “actress effect” allows us to see a broader construction of female theatricality and its impact on the English theater.

We can productively reinterpret the Willow Song scene, then, by supplementing the model of direct contact with one of celebrity. Julie D. Campbell has speculated that English male actors “were probably quite eager to prove that they could hold their own against the reputations of accomplished Italian troupes.”¹⁸ In fact, the reputations involved are those of the most famous and renowned of the Italian actresses, the tragic singer-actress of Italian court and commedia performance identified by Pamela Allen Brown in this special section as an

16. For connections between *Othello* and the commedia, see Pamela Allen Brown, “*Othello* Italianised: Xenophobia and the Erosion of Tragedy,” in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Intertextuality*, ed. Michele Marrapodi and Keir Elam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 145–57. Drusiano Martinelli’s troupe was licensed to play in the city and liberties of London in 1578 and included at least two actresses; see Robert Henke, “Border Crossings in the Commedia dell’Arte,” in *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, ed. Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 19–34, esp. 30. M. A. Katritzky identifies the actresses as Angelica Alberghini and Angela Salomana; see her *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell’Arte 1560–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 89.

17. Rachel Poulsen, “Women Performing Homoerotic Desire in English and Italian Comedy: *La Calandria*, *Gl’Ingannatii* and *Twelfth Night*,” in Brown and Parolin, *Women Players*, 171–92, at 172.

18. Julie D. Campbell, “‘Merry, nimble, stirring spirit[s]’: Academic, Salon and Commedia dell’arte Influence on the *Innamorate* of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*,” in Brown and Parolin, *Women Players*, 145–70, at 156.

innovative exponent of tragedy. In *Othello* 4.3, this model of celebrity involves the motif of tragic female lament. Commedia actresses were often called on to sing and, in the wake of the emergence of the professional female singers of the Italian stage in the 1560s, identified by M. A. Katritzky, the years around the turn of the seventeenth century saw a series of standout tragic performances for elaborate Italian courtly wedding celebrations, sung by star singers and actresses and featuring the abandoned woman as a figure of female lament.¹⁹ Such influential female performances both pre- and postdate *Othello* and include such epic laments as the virtuosic performance of the commedia actress Virginia Andreini in Monteverdi's opera *Arianna*, staged for the 1608 wedding of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy.²⁰ Earlier, in 1589, Isabella Andreini (mother-in-law to Virginia) gave a defining performance of early modern women's theatricality, the celebrated *La Pazzia d'Isabella*, staged by Andreini and the Gelosi troupe for the Florentine wedding of Ferdinand de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine.²¹ *La Pazzia* had "a significant part to play in the establishment, circulation and subsequent popularity of th[e] topos" of the erotically abandoned woman in frenzy or lament, which fast became a stock feature of the stage, eventually finding its way into opera and inflecting Ophelia's distraction in *Hamlet*.²²

Andreini's vocal and musical pyrotechnics in her role as the lamenting and distracted, abandoned Isabella require her to shift between song and speech and, further, between languages, in what Suzanne G. Cusick calls "a climactic 'mad-scene' of polyglot song" that showcased the performer's virtuosity.²³ As Giuseppe Pavoni, envoy to the Vizani family of Bologna, wrote in his eyewitness account of the performance: "Isabella meanwhile finding herself deceived

19. M. A. Katritzky, "Reading the Actress in Commedia Imagery," in Brown and Parolin, *Women Players*, 109–43; Anne MacNeil, "Weeping at the Water's Edge," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 406–17.

20. For *Arianna*'s textual survival, see Tim Carter, "Lamenting Ariadne?" *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 395–405, esp. 395–96. For Virginia Andreini's performance and her subsequent reputation, see Katritzky, *Art*, 88–89. See also Sophie Tomlinson, "The Actress and Baroque Aesthetic Effects in Renaissance Drama," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2015): 67–82.

21. See Katritzky, *Art*, 88.

22. Paolo Fabbri, "On the Origins of an Operatic Topos: The Mad-Scene," in *Con chesoavità: Studies in Italian Opera, Song, and Dance, 1580–1740*, ed. Iain Fenlon and Tim Carter (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 157–59, at 159; see also Pamela Allen Brown, "Dido, Boy Diva of Carthage: Marlowe's Dido Tragedy and the Renaissance Actress," in *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theater*, ed. Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 113–30, esp. 128. For Andreini and Ophelia, see Eric Nicholson, "Ophelia Sings Like a Prima Donna Innamorata: Ophelia's Mad Scene and the Italian Female Performer," in Henke and Nicholson, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, 81–98.

23. Suzanne G. Cusick, "Re-voicing Arianna (and Laments): Two Women Respond," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 437–49, at 437.

by Flavio's trickery . . . abandoned herself to grief, and overcome thus by passion and giving full rein to her rage and fury, went out of her mind, and ran through the city like a madwoman, stopping first one person and then another, and speaking first in Spanish, then in Greek, then in Italian and many other languages, but always nonsensically: and among other things she began to speak French, and to sing various French ditties [*canzonette pure alla Francese*], which gave inexpressible pleasure to the Most Serene Bride."²⁴ Like *La Pazzia*, the Willow Song scene in *Othello* focuses on the lamenting abandoned woman. *La Pazzia* and the Willow Song scene are also both structured around shifts between the vocal modes of speech and song. Though this quality of Desdemona's Willow Song has sometimes been submerged in *Othello*'s editorial tradition, the play's Folio text clearly interweaves speech and song, requiring the boy player to alternate between speaking within the play (to Emilia) and singing on behalf of the play (in the Willow Song ballad). According to the 1623 text, Shakespeare's boy must sing ("*Sing Willough, &c.*," line 3018), then break off to speak to Emilia ("Lay by these"), then sing again ("*Willough, Willough,*" line 3019), then once more speak to the serving woman ("Prythee high thee: he'le come anon").²⁵ Clare McManus's edition of the Folio text for the *Norton Complete Shakespeare 3rd Edition* retains this interweaving, documenting a mixed-mode performance that italicizes the boy actor's somatic and vocal performance.²⁶ Indeed, the Willow Song may raise the stakes from *La Pazzia*, requiring its performer to move between speech and song within the compact unit of a single verse line, exploiting the boy-as-Desdemona's ability to inhabit the distinct performance modes required of an actor-singer and to negotiate the shifts between song and speech with supple fluidity.

As McManus argues, the framing materials around the trope of the abandoned woman depict Shakespeare's Desdemona as the tragic woman whose abandonment (in both senses) seduces her into performance, almost against her will:

24. There is no text per se for Andreini's performance, but her charismatic display is documented in two very different texts: Flaminio Scala printed a scenario with the same title, but it bears no resemblance to the 1589 performance as described in an eyewitness account by Giuseppe Pavoni, envoy to the Vizani family of Bologna. For both, see Richard Andrews, ed., *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of Thirty Scenarios* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 225–38, at 237–38; see also Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

25. These references come from Charlton Hinman's through-line numbering: *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare: Based on Folios in the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection*, 2nd ed., ed. Charlton Hinman (New York: Norton, 1996).

26. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (Folio text), ed. Clare McManus, in *The Norton Shakespeare 3rd Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 2084–2158. The reasoning behind this editorial decision is laid out more fully in McManus, "Sing It Like Poor Barbary," 104–7.

“I have much to do,” says the boy-as-Desdemona, “But to go hang my head all at one side / And sing it like poor Barbary” (4.3.30–32).²⁷ This embedded scenario of the lamenting abandoned woman is itself framed by an intensely self-conscious theatricality: for the boy playing Desdemona, the song is framed by the narrative of Barbary, at once the singer of an English ballad and the racialized figure of a North African maid in Venetian exile, while inside this frame, the boy substitutes for Desdemona and Desdemona substitutes for Barbary, the earlier performer. The scenario is also framed by the unpinning of the boy playing Desdemona, risking the exposure of his body as the boy playing Emilia labors around him. This stress on the absence of the female body in turn intensifies the risks of the two boys’ performance and showcases their virtuosity: playing tantalizingly with the double risk of the pubescent boy’s breakable voice and the exposure of his body, the song deliberately brings the performance into jeopardy in a high-wire act of exceptional confidence in the skills of both the singing boy and the laboring boy, who must unpin Desdemona in the time it takes his co-performer to sing the ballad.²⁸

Connected through resemblances of structure and topic, the Willow Song is an Englished analogue rather than a direct copy of *La Pazzia*. Associated with femininity and pathos, early seventeenth-century theatrical song in England is an act of what Vernon Guy Dickson, in another context, calls “emulative rivalry” and often an act of outright competition.²⁹ Setting Desdemona’s song against this emulative circulation of tropes, scenarios, and theatrical structures offers a means to consider well-known Italian female singers as rivals to the early seventeenth-century English boy actor. Indeed, in national terms, Desdemona’s song turns away from Europe. As a moment of oscillation between England and Italy, and between male and female depictions of femininity, the Willow Song rejects its Italianate contexts in favor of English ones. Desdemona, an elite woman abandoned on an island by a man of unreliable affections, might be expected to embark on a courtly lament akin to Monteverdi’s *Arianna*, but, when set against these developing European traditions of female lament, her passionate song is conspicuously English and deliberately unornamented. The early modern audience witnessed a performance of virtuosic simplicity that gives the boy playing Desdemona the chance to emulate and surpass his Italian female counterparts.

27. References are to the Norton edition of *Othello* cited in n. 26.

28. Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 27; Carol Chillington Rutter, “Unpinning Desdemona (Again) or ‘Who Would be Toll’d With Wenches in a Shew?’” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 28, no. 1 (2010): 111–32, esp. 114, 117.

29. Vernon Guy Dickson, “‘A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant’: Emulation, Rhetoric, and Cruel Propriety in *Titus Andronicus*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 376–409, at 384.

The performance of the boy-as-Desdemona turns away from the avant-garde complexity of Italian court song in favor of importing a popular, preexisting English ballad into the play. This performance of virtuosic simplicity is an Englishing of what Melinda Gough has elsewhere called “one of the period’s most avant-garde performance trends: the virtuosic solo female voice.”³⁰ It is an adaptation designed, in other words, to emulate and surpass the complexity of the boy’s tragic Italian counterparts. Shakespeare’s “super-subtle Venetian” (line 707) is inflected with the virtuosic flexibility of the Italian actress-singer, extending Brown’s category of “the foreign diva played by skilled English boys” to offer a particularly Englished analogue of the *pazzia* trope, determined by English casting practices and the bodily presence of the boy actor.³¹

In *Othello* 4.3, then, the abandoned lamenting woman’s femininity is forged not only in relation to the lack of female players on the English stage but also in relation to their presence elsewhere. In fact, that very lack becomes less a necessary negotiation of a given circumstance (‘there are no women on this stage’) than an ideological statement (‘there should be no women on this stage’) which is then parlayed into an aesthetic principle promoting the skill of the boy actor (‘we believe there is no *need* for women on this stage’). Shaping a practice of theater as emulative and mobile, women’s theatricality is such that they do not have to be on the English playhouse stages to influence what happens there. Such connections between emulation, mobility, and female virtuosity hold true for other national traditions, though in distinct ways. In French tragedy and tragicomedy, in the *comedia* of the Spanish *Siglo de oro*, and—insistently—in the Italian mixed-sex troupes, heightened feminine virtuosity happens on stages that, in a range of ways, admit women. The English commercial stage, however, registers continental femininity in the absence of a staged female presence or agency. The kind of one-upmanship found in *Othello* demonstrates that the English canon does not develop outside of a relationship with the female performer on the continent. Rather, it wrestles with and hence is part of that tradition. In this sense, the plays staged in the English commercial playhouses are documents not only of women’s exclusion but also of female performers’ presence elsewhere.

It follows, then, that lack of awareness about other national traditions, and of women’s contributions within these traditions, can obscure fruitful questions

30. Melinda J. Gough, “Marie de Medici’s 1605 *ballet de la reine* and the Virtuosic Female Voice,” *Early Modern Women* 7 (2012): 127–56, at 141, 129. Gough notes Italian culture’s prestige in European courts, and the duke of Lennox’s unsuccessful efforts to secure the Caccini for Anna of Denmark (141).

31. For Hinman’s through-line numbering, see n. 25. Pamela Allen Brown, “‘Cattle of this colour’: Boying the Diva in *As You Like It*,” *Early Theatre* 15, no. 1 (2012): 145–66, at 145.

about canonical plays, whether in England or elsewhere. These and other questions central to the expanded field of Renaissance drama as this introduction has attempted to define it serve as a larger shared backdrop for the essays gathered in this special section.

The first essay, by Caroline Bicks, looks to a less anticipated theatrical venue for female performance: the recusant continental convent. This essay examines productive intersections of mobility and cloistering in the career of the seventeenth-century English “Jesuitess,” Mary Ward, and in the network of religious houses that Ward established around Europe. Persisting into the eighteenth century, Ward’s convents for both English and continental girls were themselves transnational spaces. Bicks explores the ways in which the students’ theatrical training offered a means of winning the support and protection of prominent aristocratic patrons—particularly in the case of the Bavarian house—and hence identifies performance as a tool for negotiating tensions between the local (national and civic power structures within Bavaria) and the supranational (the global hierarchies of the Vatican and the Jesuit order proper).

Perry Gethner and Melinda Gough’s essay also takes seriously the intersection of religion with women and drama: in this case, thirty-five years of French religious and civil war. Protracted religious and civil conflict, and its economic consequences, had a stultifying effect on theatrical mobility in France more generally, they assert. And yet, royal patronage of mixed-gender troupes from Italy proved one important factor in the eventual creation of significant new theatrical spaces for French women as performers, playwrights, and cultural arbiters. Leading up to the period often labeled the high point of French baroque drama, novel developments regarding genre and character became possible in no small part thanks to the arrival of actresses on the Parisian commercial stage, the authors suggest. Beyond the public playhouse, moreover, on the court stage and in private salons, women made additional significant contributions in relation to performance and dramatic production.

María M. Carrión’s article on Spain’s *Siglo de Oro*, too, outlines a number of barriers to women’s theatrical activity. But efforts to ban or contain Spanish women players, she argues, met with remarkably successful resistance on the part of women players (*farsantas*). Such actions took the form of legal petitions, as other scholars have noted, yet Carrión shows that an equally important weapon in the *farsantas*’ arsenal was one particular dramatic role: the *mujer varonil*. The Spanish actresses who played this block-buster character not only drew spectators in droves but also gained the tools necessary to write and manage commercially successful theater, as *dramaturgas* and *autoras*. This essay indicates how within a frame that included legal and other forms of prohibition and containment, *comedia* became a more gender-inclusive public space. This story, in turn, opens up a host of unanswered questions regarding women and the law in theatrical

settings beyond Spanish borders. The highly useful bibliographic references in Carrión's notes may help to prompt future work on this and related topics by highlighting the wealth of *comedia* studies on women and performance published over the past several decades.

Our final essay, by Pamela Allen Brown, traces the touring networks of the Italian *commedia* actresses. Brown identifies these women as talented, glamorous virtuosi with a significant presence in not only Italy but also France and Spain. Such troupes and their leading female players were sought after, exotic components within pan-European networks of courtly splendor: the speed with which Vittoria Piissimi was called to Venice by Henri III in 1574, for example, was a marker of both the prince's power and the player's value. Geographic and mimetic mobility were closely connected to generic innovation, Brown argues; indeed, such elements proved key factors in these actresses' capacity to attract both courtly patrons and commercial audiences, with contemporary accounts making much of their innovative generic range. Proponents of the avant-garde forms of tragicomedy, opera, and tragicomic pastoral, and of developments in tragedy, Italian mixed-gender troupes—whose appeal rested on “extravagantly mobile and literary” star actresses—had a ripple effect, one that helped to displace both *arte* all-male playing and a repertoire that minimized fictions of female agency.

Taken together, the four essays offered here begin to make visible some of the rich opportunities for comparativist research enabled by methodologies that seek to place intersections of gender with cultural mobility at the centre of theater history inquiry.