Orgel, Stephen: Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England

1. Traditional explanations for the fact that the stage was all-male—that the guilds were all male, and that the appearance of women on stage was thought immodest—are inadequate.
   1. Spain, France, and Italy did not ban women from stage, though they were recent additions there; by Shakespeare’s time they were a commonplace, as were transvestite boys
   2. Netherlands and Protestant Germany did ban women from the stage, but they banned the stage altogether.
   3. Issue wasn’t open to question. Thomas Nashe describes continental theater as “spirting bawdy comedians that have whores and common courtesans” playing women
   4. Women were commonplace in court masques, so the problem is restricted to public theater where acting was a profession
   5. Women took parts in Lord Mayors shows of 1523 and 1534; there were also other types of female entertainers, and they played in guild and civic theatrical productions before Elizabeth, and two female theatrical singers worked in 1632.
   6. Foreign actresses were allowed on stage, and Moll Frith gave a solo performance at the Fortune in 1611.
   7. 1602, Richard Vennar advertised that gentlemen and women would appear in a play called England’s Joy; he took the receipts and ran (no play was performed), but this shows that the public would pay to see women on the public stage.
2. The theater, if not the stage, was open to women: “foreign visitors comments on the fact that English women go to the theater unescorted and unmasked” and that there wer so many that the success of the play depended on female receptiveness to it.
3. Few plays talked about women as defined apart from men; marriage comedies were usually escapes from the tyranny of elders into marriages of choice.
4. Marriage is a dangerous condition in Shakespeare, where comedies end just before marriage. “Plays that continue beyond the point where comedy ends…depict the condition as utterly disastrous.”
5. “The dangers of women in erotic situations…can be disarmed by having the women play men, just as in the theater the dangers of women on the stage…can be disarmed by having the men play the women.” The differences between men and women seem superficial.
   1. “Early modern moralists reminded their charges than “manhood was not a natural condition but a quality to be striven for and maintained only through constant vigilance.”
   2. Female genitalia were simply the inversion of the male genitalia. A fetus becomes male if it generates enough heat (strength) to press the genitals outward.
6. Stories of sudden sex change were common. Richard Crooke describes them as monstrous but also seems to believe them; this shows an important aspect of Renaissance thought—that mutually exclusive theories could be held in common. In Roaring Girl, Moll is similarly described “her birth began/ Ere she was made.”
   1. Fear that men could turn into women was denounced but also commonplace.
   2. Fear that boys who play women will be transformed by these roles.
   3. Fear that cross-dressing would enable both genders to cross these boundaries.
   4. Antitheatrical writers feared the “poison” of watching homoerotic acts on stage. Great fear that this excitement would be “enacted” after the play was over in homoerotic play.
   5. Lady Mary Wroth, however, felt that the boy on stage was “anerotic”—defused sexual attraction.
7. Homoeroticism was a fact of life. Some argue that homosexuality on stage was a way of “managing” male sexual anxieties about the infidelity of women.
   1. Public theater associated with homosexual prostitution
   2. Sodomy was against the law, but “inveighed against repeated in legal and theological contexts” but never prosecuted. Heterosexual fornication was more engergetically prosecuted.
      1. Example: Day laborer named Meredith Davy.
   3. Charges of sodomy charged on when associated with Papism or other crimes.
   4. Sodomy was defined so specifically that it was impossible to prosecute:
      1. Sex had to be nonconsensual (rape)
      2. Prosecution had to prove both penetration and ejaculation
      3. Courts required a witness.
   5. Sodomy “covered a multitude of horrendous sins” but is always vague and associated with Catholic countries.
   6. Multiple plays by Renaissance dramatists made overt jokes about “homosexual” behavior.
8. Conclusion: “Why did only boys play women? For Renaissance society the economic analogy between boys and women overlaid a more essential one: boys were, like women – but unlike men—acknowledged objects of sexual attraction for men.” We should consider this in understand apprentice actor relations, audience response, and writers’ exploitation of that response.