

Part I

The Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

Women's road to acceptance in the theatrical world has been long and thorny, nor has it by any means come to an end. There has been no straightforward progress either in women's professional access to the theatre or in society's views of gender roles and of women's proper sphere, on which such access is contingent. Though the social climate from 1550 to 1800 strongly discouraged women from participating in public life, in the Restoration period there was less need for women to apologise for presuming to write than in the eighteenth century, and working women were more acceptable in the Renaissance than two centuries later.

This is not to say that women were emancipated in the Elizabethan period, or that the relationship of the sexes was conceived as anything but hierarchical, with the concept of female subservience derived from Genesis. Men were the heads of the family and women were expected to obey. The power Elizabeth I wielded as Queen of England, and the panegyrics addressed to her, should not blind us to the legally deprived status of women at her time. The example of the politically astute Queen did not alter anything in the basic misogyny of her society, though clearly one could not openly disparage the essence of women or their intellectual abilities since this would imply a criticism of the sovereign.

Our picture of the Renaissance as the heyday of humanist education for women is based on a handful of aristocratic women who were taught alongside their brothers and who were in no way typical. As a rule, such learning would have been considered entirely superfluous for a girl, whose education rather stressed the domestic skills she was expected to use in her future marriage. Elizabeth's successor, James I, is typical of this misogynist climate in having little taste for learned women and is said to have asked, sourly, of a female prodigy conversant in Latin, Greek and Hebrew: 'But can she spin?'¹

Marriage was considered a woman's proper vocation. Legally, women were powerless and passed from the authority of the father to that of the husband. Wives could not own property (though single women and widows could) and they could not make wills, or testify in court. Such indignities brought some benefits, though, for they could not even be imprisoned for debt, since responsibility for payments was vested with the husband, who was liable for his wife's expenses. A woman's body, her children and her money belonged to her husband. He could separate her from her children, keep her prisoner and beat her, and the only way she could secure any income for herself was by way of a complicated legal procedure. The so-called marriage settlement was an agreement made before a marriage under which property was vested with trustees for the benefit of the prospective wife. Because of this financial dependence, a wife could not leave a cruel husband, unless she chose to become a kept woman or her family was willing to shelter her. Church law did not permit divorce unless the union itself could be shown to be illegal, in which case the marriage was declared invalid. A separation could be agreed upon, but in this case remarriage was impossible. Although, legally, single women and widows were slightly better off, few women remained single by choice. Single women were often completely dependent on the charity of male relatives unless they had inherited money of their own.

While marriage laws were harsh, life was at times rather different, though in this brief introduction there is little space to go beyond generalisations. Many people, especially from the lower social orders, were not married in church and thus not covered by the laws mentioned. Even the law that wives were property could be used as a way for partners to divorce by 'selling' the wife – a custom lasting well into the nineteenth century, as readers of Hardy's *The Mayor of*

Casterbridge will remember. Besides, in other respects women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were sometimes less circumscribed in their activities than in later periods.

The heavy emphasis placed on domestic duties notwithstanding, it was acceptable for women to have a job or a business. Women dominated such professions as midwifery and millinery, aided men in business, and ran enterprises after the deaths of their husbands, though less frequently in England than in the more liberal Netherlands. Even domestic duties were by no means without responsibility, since they involved the running of large households and the supervision of cottage industries. To be sure, the scope of women's possible activities had dwindled. In the Middle Ages, women could govern large territories and levy armies in the absence of their husbands, because holding a particular position involved specific functions, irrespective of sex; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, responsibility and power increasingly shifted from any holder of a trust to those with constitutional rights, from whose number women and the unpropertied were *ipso facto* excluded.² In the course of the seventeenth century, women were also steadily losing ground in the workforce, partly because of the encroachment of men on typically feminine professions, such as midwifery, but also because, increasingly, working women came to be seen as ungentle.

A woman's intellectual potential depended very much on the education she received. Illiteracy among women was naturally greater than among men, but decreased in the course of the seventeenth century, owing to the Protestant insistence on everyone being able to read the Bible. Women were, of course, barred from the universities. Men generally looked down on female education and it was a common view that women were intellectually unfit. Right to the end of the eighteenth century, women were generally very self-conscious about the shortcomings of their knowledge and their lack of formal education, though we should not take their protestations of ignorance too literally. For all their feigned humility, they were often widely read, highly cultured and interested in both science and literature.

The improvement of female education was an issue seventeenth-century feminists focused on – they did not envisage radical changes in gender roles or social norms. Indeed, the double moral standard granting men sexual freedoms but expecting women to

remain chaste was universally accepted by men and women alike. In the case of women, virtue was almost synonymous with chastity, and virginity before marriage and absolute faithfulness thereafter were the pillars of a woman's reputation. There was, of course, a very practical economic reason behind this repressiveness, namely the laws on inheritance. Since it was desirable for a man that property should be bequeathed to his legitimate heirs only, female sexuality had to be checked to ensure that no bastards of the wife inherited what was not their due. A man's illegitimate issue presented no such threat.

The turmoil of the Civil War once again gave women a greater range of responsibilities and allowed them temporarily to overcome some disabilities. Royalist women tried to manage and protect their banished husbands' estates, or spied on enemy movements. On the other side, Puritan women wrote and handed in petitions to Parliament, and the Levellers even allowed women 'inspired by the Spirit' the right to speak publicly, which was normally considered unseemly. Not even the most radical sects, however, demanded legal or social equality for women. The crisis of the monarchy led to no similar crisis of the family. The King, indeed, had likened himself to a father of his people, positioned at the head of the state, as a man was at the head of his family. Now the people had risen against their absolutist monarch, had deposed and even executed him. Yet no subversive parallels were drawn with the absolute power of the husband within a marriage. The Restoration feminist prose writer Mary Astell criticised the Puritan radicals for their blinkered patriarchal view of social revolution:

how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne,
Not *Milton* himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*,
or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny.³

Not even Astell, however, was to challenge the institution of marriage itself.

The commercial theatre in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was closed to women in any capacity. Acting roles were all taken by men, with women's parts being played by boys, both in the public and in the private theatres. Despite their name, the private theatres were equally accessible to the public; they merely charged higher admission prices and were therefore socially more

exclusive. This was not so on the Continent. There were many actresses on the French and Italian stages, but a French troupe who had tried to introduce this custom to London in 1629 were booed and pelted off the stage. However, there were closed performances at Court and private theatricals in aristocratic country houses, where aristocratic ladies performed in masques and pastorals. Queen Anne, and especially Queen Henrietta Maria, greatly enjoyed these theatricals, encouraged their composition and even took roles themselves – a practice by no means universally approved of. Anne and her maids of honour scandalised some of the courtiers by performing in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* in short 'barbaresque mantles' and blackened faces, 'face and neck bare', apparel which seemed too 'light and curtizanlike for such great ones'.⁴ Henrietta Maria had been used to acting in Court theatricals in France, but the more staid English courtiers disapproved of her appearance on stage, especially when she played in male costume.⁵ After one of Queen Henrietta Maria's performances at Court, the Puritan William Prynne in his *Historiomatrix* denounced as a whore any Christian woman who dared to speak publicly on stage in male clothing – an attack for which he had his ears cut off. On the other hand, Milton's masque *Comus* suggests that women's acting cannot have been uncommon in aristocratic Puritan circles. Whatever the public resistance of the radicals, the early-seventeenth-century private theatricals may have paved the way for the acceptance of actresses and for the emergence of high-born 'gentlemen playwrights' during the Restoration period.