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A JACOBEOAN DRAMATIC USAGE OF ‘ACTRESS’

The earliest citation of the word ‘actress’ used in a dramatic sense offered by the OED is Dryden’s epilogue to The Pilgrim (1700): ‘To stop the trade of love behind the scene,/Where actresses make bold with married men’. The word ‘actress’ was in use from the late sixteenth century to signify ‘a female actor or doer’, while the generic term ‘actor’ was used to signify ‘player’ (from 1581) and ‘doer’ (from 1603); but, according to the OED, it was not until some forty years after the arrival of women on the professional stage that the terminology started to shift. The notion that the concept of the actress belongs firmly to the Restoration theatre is reiterated in a recent volume of essays focused on women players in England between 1500 and 1660. The editors, Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, assert in the Introduction that ‘The word *actress* in the sense of “female stage player” was not in use in early modern England’.¹ However, the present author has cited and discussed several uses of ‘actress’ from documents treating the dramatic performances of Queen Henrietta-Maria: this evidence calls into question both the dating recorded by the OED and Brown’s and Parolin’s sense that the theatrical meaning of ‘actress’ was unfamiliar to

¹ Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (eds.), Women Players in England, 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage (Burlington, 2005), p.4, n.10.

early modern audiences.² More persuasive counter-evidence is provided by an example of the word ‘actress’ used within early modern drama itself.

The play in question is a Jacobean city comedy, The Family of Love (pub. 1608), authorship of which was traditionally attributed to Middleton, but which recent bibliographical scholarship has shown to be the work of the playwright and pirate Lording Barry (*bap.* 1580, *d.* 1629).³ In the fifth act of the play, the hero Gerardine invites his pregnant mistress Maria to participate in his culminating ruse; that is, for Gerardine in the disguise of an apparitor (an officer of the church courts) to accuse Maria’s uncle and guardian Doctor Glister of impregnating his niece, with the aim of securing from him Maria’s inheritance from her deceased father, plus an extra thousand pounds. Gerardine speaks to Maria:

I have been forging of a mirthful Plot
To celebrate our wish’d Conjunction;
Which now digested, come to summon thee
To be an Actresse in the Comedy.⁴

² Sophie Tomlinson, ‘“She that Plays the King”’: Henrietta-Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture’ in Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (eds.), The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After (London and New York, 1992), 189-207 (pp. 189, 198); Tomlinson, Women on Stage in Stuart Drama (Cambridge, 2005), 4.

³ Gary Taylor, Paul Mulholland and MacD. P. Jackson, ‘Thomas Middleton, Lording Barry, and The Family of Love’, PBSA, xciii (1999), 213-41. The attribution to Middleton derives from a playlist of Edward Archer published in 1656. A twentieth-century edition of The Family of Love published in the Nottingham Drama Texts series and edited by Simon Shepherd accepted Middleton’s authorship, while acknowledging claims for revisions by Dekker and Barry (see note 5). The Family of Love is not included in Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works, gen.eds. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2007).

⁴ The Family of Love (1608), sig. Hv; Thomas Middleton (attrib.), The Family of Love, ed. Simon Shepherd (Nottingham, 1979), V.iii.1776-82. I am grateful to my

This speech, together with Gerardine's reference three lines later to 'our Scene', presents an image of Maria as both an agent and an actor in her lover's histrionic contrivance; it therefore qualifies the assertion made in the OED that 'actress' was 'at first used in the general sense, not in the dramatic' (OED, actress, *n*). Rather than exhibiting the strain of elevated – and, critics have argued - parodically romantic verse spoken by the couple, Gerardine's speech instead evinces his origins in the classical trickster figure, perhaps with a nod at the Italian tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, in which women were prominent performers.⁵ Barry refrains from dwelling on Maria's sexual experience; 'actress' does not here carry the connotation of 'whore'. The Family of Love was written for performance by the newly formed Children of the King's Revels. Within the stylized and highly self-reflexive dramatic repertoire of an early modern boys' company, it seems, it was possible to conceptualize a vivid idea of an actress.

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post-graduate student Mary-Jean Milburn whose work on The Family of Love first drew this passage to my attention; see Mary-Jean Milburn, '“The Hand that Rocks the Cradle”: The Problems and Possibilities of Early Modern Motherhood in selected plays by William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton and Lording Barry' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Auckland, 2006).

⁵ On Italian actresses and their possible influence upon Shakespearean drama, see the essays by Julie D. Campbell and Rachel Poulsen in Women Players in England, 1500-1660.

