PERFORMANCES OF WOMANHOOD IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH THEATRE AND NOVEL

A dissertation presented

by

Tabitha Kenlon

to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April 2014
PERFORMANCES OF WOMANHOOD IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH THEATRE AND NOVEL

by

Tabitha Kenlon

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University
April 2014
ABSTRACT

Traditional literary criticism typically divides genres into discrete spheres, erecting barriers between plays and novels that are not entirely historically accurate. This dissertation argues that in eighteenth-century England, the walls between theatre, novels, and conduct manuals were permeable to the point of being irrelevant, as writers participated in a three-part conversation about the social performance of gender roles. I examine the construction of the female ideal on Shakespeare’s stage and in eighteenth-century English theatre, conduct manuals, and novels, establishing performance as a common practice linking the centuries and mediums. The casting of boy actors in women’s roles on Shakespeare’s stage, I contend, created a system of gender identification by presenting simultaneous depictions of transgression and propriety, which was recognizable well into the eighteenth century. Novels and conduct manuals borrowed performative techniques from the stage to imbue their female characters with a similar dual nature and ability to engage in respectable rebellion.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fact that many of my acknowledgements are likely typical of any extended project makes them no less meaningful. My mother, Marilee, who taught me to read before I started school, shared with me her love of imagination and of learning. The only excuse my dad, Ed, accepted for staying up past bedtime was “Daddy, I’m writing!” My siblings Seth and Joanna have been supportive throughout my academic pursuits, and my youngest brother, William, who is three years away from his own doctorate, has been a huckleberry friend and a true compatriot. My friends, both near and far, have borne the tumult of the last six years with patience and optimism. Amy Cox has the grace of a saint and the spirit of a pioneer. Sarah “Samuel!” Marsh provides baked goods and chutpah at precisely the right moment. Joyce Yin and Ileana Schinder are my chicas toujours.

My dissertation committee encouraged and challenged me. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon introduced me to performance studies and helped me find, shape, and foreground an argument. I left conversations with her feeling smarter and invigorated. Nicole Aljoe ordered me to read *Persuasion* and took me out for hot chocolate, gifts I can never repay. Her abiding love for literature reminded me why I was doing what I was doing. Erika Boeckeler (who has impeccable taste in tea) provided detailed comments and was forgiving when I was unable to address them all. If I ever write a book about Shakespeare, it will be because of her.

Michael Booth, a visiting instructor, generously let me shadow him on two Shakespeare
classes, teaching me about teaching and displaying a dizzying speed with iambic pentameter. My office mates Art Zillereuro and Sarah Connell, with whom I jokingly formed the Curmudgeon Club, are in fact two of the kindest and most generous people I know, as well as being modest but intimidatingly gifted scholars. Throughout this final semester, weekly pizza lunches with Sarah have sustained me. Our concerns rarely became maudlin, as Sarah’s unstoppable sense of humor and determination consoled and cajoled me (the British chocolate helped, too).

Now for the more unusual acknowledgements. As I began my doctoral studies, my eyesight worsened, and it became necessary for me to read texts electronically. Even in this digital age, the amount of printed material that is accessible to the blind or visually impaired is staggering small; the number of critical or specialized texts that exist electronically is even lower. The greatest struggle of my degree program was in some ways not the preliminary exams, the field statements, the comprehensive exams, the language exams, the dissertation, or the defense. Rather, it was getting the books I needed to do all of those things. I did not receive all the books on my reading lists for my comprehensive exams. I was registered with the campus Disability Resource Center (DRC), which contacted publishers on my behalf. Many publishers never responded to requests for electronic files. Others claimed that they didn’t have electronic files, even for books published three years ago. It felt like discrimination and censorship. Fortunately, I received a scholarship that allowed me to purchase e-books and hard copies, which I delivered to the DRC for scanning.

Some publishers, however, were simply wonderful. Palgrave, Routledge, and Blackwell were unfailingly responsive, quick, and thorough. Judy at Harvard University Press was a
pleasure to work with, and on more than one occasion, Katherine at the University of Pennsylvania Press restored my faith in all things academic. John Benjamins Publishing gave me a book gratis even though it was available as an e-book, understanding that if I had better retinas, I could have accessed a hard copy for free at my campus library.

Over the last few years, I have sometimes wondered what purpose this doctorate serves. I only needed to go to the texts I was examining for an answer. I have been writing about the state of women’s lives and efforts to control their actions. Frequently, I have been elated at the progress women have made since the eighteenth century, evidenced by the very fact of my own higher education, but those moments were just as often tempered by the recognition of my privileged state. There are still vast numbers of women, in this country and around the world, who never get the chance to do what I have done, who don’t know what a PhD is, who don’t know how to read. It is to them, and to the brave women writers of every century, and to my mother and her mother, that this work is dedicated.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction, Or How to Become a Woman</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: “Who Is ’t Can Read a Woman?”: Sexual Identity on Shakespeare's Stage</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: “Such Perverse Obedience!”: Hannah Cowley’s Unconventionally Traditional Women</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Role of the Wife: Courtship, Marriage, and Advice Literature</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Training to be a Heroine: Jane Austen’s Performing Women</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thomas Sheridan was unhappy. He had identified a problem, first within the clergy and then the public at large. So in 1790 he published his *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, in which he explained his concerns and laid out various solutions. Everyone, he fretted, was:

...confounding under one term, two very distinct things, that of mere reading, and reading well. In learning to read, two very different ends may be proposed. The one, that of silent reading, to enable us to understand authors, and store our minds with knowledge; the other, that of reading aloud, by which we may communicate the sentiments of authors to our hearers, with perspicuity and force. All our pains have been employed in accomplishing the former end; and with regard to the latter, we are either set wrong by false rules or left wholly to chance. (91-2)

His lectures on reading aloud appeared in two volumes, one dedicated to prose, and the other to verse.

Jane Austen also had strong feelings about reading aloud, which she expressed in a letter: “Our 2nd evening’s reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I beleive [sic] something must be attributed to my Mother’s too rapid way of getting on—& tho’ she perfectly understands the Characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought” (*Letters*, 203). Austen’s disappointment with the performance of her novel is echoed by Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, who seems to consider an inability to read aloud effectively a serious character flaw.
and wonders how Elinor could love Edward, whose “manner in reading to us” is “spiritless” and “tame” (n.pag.).

Neither Sheridan nor Austen are discussing plays, but in the eighteenth century, plays were not the only literature that was spoken and heard. Printed matter of all kind was read aloud, plays, novels, poetry, periodicals, conduct manuals, and so on; the medium was irrelevant. Traditional literary criticism, however, typically divides genres into discrete spheres, erecting barriers between plays and novels that are not entirely historically accurate. In the pages that follow, I argue that in eighteenth-century England, the walls between theatre, novels, and conduct manuals were permeable to the point of being irrelevant, as writers participated in a three-part conversation about the social performance of gender roles. I examine the construction of the female ideal on Shakespeare’s stage and in eighteenth-century English theatre, conduct manuals, and novels, establishing performance as a common practice linking the centuries and mediums. The casting of boy actors in women’s roles on Shakespeare’s stage, I contend, created a system of gender identification by presenting simultaneous depictions of transgression and propriety, which was recognizable well into the eighteenth century. Novels and conduct manuals borrowed performative techniques from the stage to imbue their female characters with a similar dual nature and ability to engage in respectable rebellion.

I begin by examining one of the most famous examples of staged gender fluidity: the boy actors who played women in Shakespeare’s theatre. A scrutiny of this historical precedent and its lingering effects on eighteenth-century dramatic convention provides a valuable foundation for a discussion of how audiences were taught to recognize women on stage and, as I argue, in
conduct manuals and novels. Since women could not physically be on stage, their presence had to be indicated through a series of signs, which included clothing, spoken directives, and the performance of the traits a woman was thought to possess. Feminist and performance studies scholar Sue-Ellen Case discusses the semiotics of such a system, observing, “A live woman standing on the stage is not a biological or natural reality...the conventions of the stage produce a meaning for the sign ‘woman’, which is based upon their cultural associations with the female gender” (145). Following this line of reasoning, it might be concluded that not only is a “live woman standing on the stage” not a reality, but is also not a necessity. If all that is required to transmit “woman” is a collection of signs, established by, transmitted through, and received by what Case refers to as the “dominant ideology” (144), such roles could be, and were, played by anyone, including young boys.

After the system of gender codes had been established, it continued to define how “woman” was presented and perceived through both visual and textual clues, and the close relationship between theatre and other writing in the eighteenth century allowed the gender identification codes to transfer easily from the stage to the less visual realm of conduct books and novels. Even readers who did not frequent the theatre or read plays regularly were able to recognize the system of codes, since it was reinforced in their daily lives by the women they knew or were. The codes created the sex of “woman,” which, Judith Butler argues, “Is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” (Bodies That Matter, n.pag.). These regulatory norms—and their transgressive interpretations—were
communicated through multiple forms of writing.

In her study of the eighteenth-century novel, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong suggests that the novel provided a literary interpretation of the ideal woman as delineated in conduct manuals. However, I argue that the work of instruction was also (and originally) being carried out in the theatre, where appropriate behavior was still visually represented and reinforced in the eighteenth century, just as it had been on Shakespeare’s stage. Women writers were thus able to rely on (and exploit) their readers’ faith in the larger signifiers of “woman” to question and even reinvent signs or apply them in new ways. Under the cover of this recognizable framework, subtle irregularities could exist and flourish—bearded, hiding behind skirts, or what you will.

While Armstrong has shown the relationship between conduct manuals and novels, other scholars have explored connections between advice literature and theatre, establishing a longstanding connection between the two that I believe persisted through the eighteenth century. Kathleen Ashley, for instance, has identified female conduct directives in medieval cycle plays, observing that many scenes seem dedicated to acting out proper social behavior for women. David Mann has discussed similar didactic tendencies in Renaissance theatre, and in *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, Jean E. Howard notes that there was an increase in the number of books on housewifery in the late seventeenth century. Critics have also pointed out links between Shakespeare and courtesy books, such as the influence of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* on *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; Martine van Elk has delineated the use of Italian courtly manners in *A
Winter’s Tale. Ann Rosalind Jones has identified a shift in courtesy books’ presentations of the female ideal from witty women adept at self-display (such as Beatrice from Much Ado) to a silent and domestic bourgeois wife.

In the eighteenth century, theatre, conduct manuals, and novels presented an ability to perform as an important part of courtship and marriage. Demonstrating the permeability of the divisions between genres, conduct manuals frequently included advice not just in prose, but also in the form of letters, conversations, and miniature play-scripts. Playwrights like Hannah Cowley created characters who engaged in performance and deception, using Shakespearean feats of disguise and cross-dressing even as they maintained their respectability; in fact, the heroines typically had no choice but to use transgressive methods to achieve the result society expected of them. Conduct manuals sometimes delivered contradictory messages, such as when The Female Mentor (1793) suggests that the way to cure a young lady who was reading too many novels was to have her read The Female Quixote—a novel (and a highly entertaining one at that). Other volumes counseled women on how to conceal their affection for a man until after he had declared his and how to make a man change his mind and think that reversing his decision was his idea.

Conduct books have been linked separately to both theatre and novels, and this dissertation closes the circle and connects all three. The common thread uniting the three in this

---

1 Some recent scholarship has embraced a cross-medium approach and has focused on novels and theatre; however, most of these studies concentrate on writers who contributed to both mediums and thus trace highly individualized influences, and none of them discuss conduct manuals. Two entries that were inspiring and useful to this project are Emily Hodgson Anderson’s Eighteenth-Century Authorship and the Play of Fiction: Novels and the Theatre, Haywood to Austen (Routledge, 2011) and Nora Nachumi’s Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists and the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage (AMS Press, 2008).
discussion is the performance of womanhood. As Judith Butler states, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative Acts,” 270). Eighteenth-century authors who wrote about women repeated the spirit of these stylized acts in their characters, but often with small adjustments that suggested alternative interpretations. The result was female characters who were recognizable as socially-acceptable women and fulfilled the basic behavioral requirements of their gender while they engaged in activities that had the potential to threaten the structure they purported to uphold. Womanliness was something to be learned and performed, or to use Joan Riviere’s phrasing, something that could be “assumed and worn as a mask” (38). The mask of womanliness could be used to hide the unorthodox methods the women engaged in.

The purpose of conduct manuals was to inform women how they should act—how to perform the role of dutiful daughter, faithful wife, thoughtful mother, etc. In plays and novels, female characters enacted models of obedience and demonstrated the penalties of transgression (and sometimes the freedoms). Both presentations, the printed and the staged, depend on performances to communicate the desired outcome. Given the significance of performance and gender performativity within Shakespeare and eighteenth-century literature, the critical methodology of performance studies offers unique insight into the texts under consideration here.

Performance studies grew primarily out of theatre studies departments discontent with current models of training and exploration; Richard Schechner’s 1988 essay, “Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach,” suggests, “What needs to be added [to performing arts
curricula] is how performance is used in politics, medicine, religion, popular entertainments, and ordinary face-to-face interactions” (8). Performance studies therefore draws from multiple disciplines, practices, and theories, such as sociology, anthropology, ethnography, ritual, ceremonies, activism, gender studies, and queer theory.

A key branch of performance studies is based on J.L. Austin’s theory of performative speech acts, laid out in a series of lectures given at Harvard University, which were collected and published in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*. The basic assumption of speech act theory is that some words perform the act they refer to, or as Austin puts it, “to say something is to do something” (12). For instance, saying “I bet” establishes a wager. Austin provides more examples in greater detail in the first lecture, and he goes on to describe situations in which the speech act is ineffective or problematic. In my first chapter, I apply speech act tenets to the clothing worn by male actors playing women’s roles on Shakespeare’s stage; the act of putting on the dress has such power to transform males into females that it was a great worry to anti-theatrical pamphleteers. In reverse, women characters who disguised them as men so thoroughly changed their identity that they became unrecognizable even to fathers, husbands, brothers, and lovers, until the character performed a verbal speech act and revealed—thus reestablishing—their true selves. Performance studies invites deeper investigations of speech and action and the intersection of the two.

Henry Bial points out that Austin’s theory is only one level of “performativity” and notes that the other is used “to describe a performance without the connotations of artifice or superficiality that accompany the word ‘theatrical’”; he praises Judith Butler’s synthesis of the
two meanings in her characterization of gender, which he summarizes as: “the acts which constitute gender are not expressive of a reality; they constitute that reality through their performance” (“Performativity,” 175, 176). All of the texts discussed in the following chapters participate in an attempt to constitute and regulate gender by defining the performances of women. In many cases, writers depicted women adhering to broad social conventions, such as confining their sexual desire to marriage, but they experimented with variations that might allow women to perform as expected while engaging in transgressive behavior. Writers demonstrated that gender was not, as Butler argues, a stable expression of reality, but a fluid and slippery concept that underwent constant renegotiations. Thus, Hannah Cowley’s heroines could outsmart and deceive male authority figures in their pursuit of marriage, as well as dress like a man and seduce another woman if need be.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes performance studies as “a postdiscipline of inclusions” that sets limits neither on what can be studied nor on what approach can be taken (43). She elaborates: “Performance Studies starts from the premise that its objects of study are not to be divided up and parceled out, medium by medium, to various other disciplines—music, dance, dramatic literature, art history” (43). The list does not include novels and other written forms of literature, but the application of performance studies to other mediums is not without precedent (and given Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s inclusive attitude, it is probably not prohibited). In their introduction to Performativity and Performance, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provide a speech-act reading of a passage from Henry James’s The Golden Bowl, and J. Hillis Miller offers an even deeper exploration of the author in Literature as Conduct: Speech
Acts in Henry James. Critics have also employed speech act and performativity in studies of Byron’s *Don Juan* and Jane Austen. Such previous work establishes a precedent for the application of performance studies theories to texts not created for the stage. The eighteenth century’s preoccupation with social and gender performance, I believe, makes every genre suitable for such an exploration. Plays, conduct manuals, and novels all paid attention to social issues like marriage and women’s position in and outside of it, and both their subject matter and their close relationship reveal a fascination with performance.

The chapters that follow identify and interpret moments of performance in three different mediums across multiple centuries, all of them constructing and questioning the female ideal. Chapter 1 discusses Shakespeare’s stage, on which there were often layers of performance as male actors played female characters who assumed male disguise, providing an opportunity to examine how gender was communicated through clothing and action. Shakespeare contributed to a precedent of presenting virtuous women in unconventional settings that retained its power into the eighteenth century. The focus of chapter 2 is on four plays by Hannah Cowley, creator of characters with wit and intelligence who outsmarted the men around them even as they participated in appropriate social structures like paternally-approved marriages. These contradictions were played out in the subject of chapter 3, conduct manuals, which declared the importance of respectable courtship and marriage while illustrating performances women might

---

2 The witty heroines, rooted in some of Shakespeare’s most appealing female characters, such as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, “plays a dual part, both fulfilling an archetypal role necessary to romance, and establishing her independence through the use of wit in her power games with the romantic hero” (Bloom 53-54). Donald A. Bloom’s description of the witty heroine continues, “the gender (both her chromosomal sex and the mythology attached to it)…plays a central part not only in the romance, but in the comedy, for the wit and independence of such a heroine tends to undermine or overturn the expected hierarchical order” (54). His study discusses Shakespeare, Dryden, Congreve, and Austen, and his assessment applies easily to eighteenth-century women playwrights like Hannah Cowley, whose heroines follow a Shakespearean tradition and anticipate Austen.
undertake to achieve small victories of control. Chapter 4 explores the performances within Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* as characters try to read each other’s speech and action accurately, ever mindful of their own.

This study not only establishes a previously unacknowledged three-part conversation between eighteenth-century theatre, conduct manuals, and novels, but it also does so through a specific focus of attention (women) and technique (performance). Working toward a more thorough engagement with every aspect involved in the development of literary forms and the women they influenced enhances critical understanding of the complex roles women play.

**Chapter Descriptions**

The first chapter, “‘Who Is ‘t Can Read a Woman?’: Sexual Identity on Shakespeare’s Stage,” examines the ways gender was established in the Elizabethan theatre and proposes that visual and textual clues created and enforced a system of signs that communicated the idea of “woman” even when her body was not present. The visual and verbal components did not always work to support each other; clothes often contradicted what was being said or performed and vice versa. The tension between the two enabled Shakespeare’s characters to perform the ideals of one while consciously using the other to undermine the first.

The chapter’s first section examines the significance of clothing both on and off stage and introduces what I call the “invisible transvestite.” Through an interrogation of Marjorie Garber’s commentary on clothing and sexuality, I argue that in Shakespeare’s cross-dressing roles, the transvestite that Garber sees was as imaginary as the woman, a trick that created layers of
performance and gender memory. In *As You Like It*, the male actor first presents himself as Rosalind, properly attired in a dress. When Rosalind and Celia run away, Rosalind becomes Ganymede, and the male actor is now dressed in the trousers of a man. Supposedly, Rosalind is performing an act of transvestitism, but on the English Renaissance stage, the audience did not see a woman dressed as a man. They saw a man dressed as a man. The woman and the transvestite are invisible, hidden behind the man, and it is up to the text to remind the audience that Ganymede is in fact a woman, which it does to varying degrees. All of the cross-dressed women confide in either a co-conspirator on stage or with the audience, admitting uncertainty, fear, or love for a man—usually a weakness or a similar “female” trait.

However, the male disguise simultaneously gives Shakespeare’s female characters greater freedom to speak their minds and engage in spaces that would have been otherwise unavailable to them, such as Portia’s triumph as the lawyer Balthazar in the courtroom of *The Merchant of Venice*. Their words then support their male clothing but contradict their true sex. Only Rosalind, Portia, and her servant Nerissa reappear in female garb at the end of their plays. Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Innogen in *Cymbeline* remain in their male clothing, standing by their male lovers, through the end of the final scene. The transvestite remains invisible, the clothes and the text failing to support each other, and the audience can only depend on the words and actions of the characters on stage as proof that some of the men dressed as men are actually women. Thus, it is the performance of womanhood that establishes the woman, despite her obvious transgression, and it is this simultaneity of respectability and misbehavior that could still be seen in the writing of the eighteenth century, on stage and in
novels and conduct books.

In the second section, close readings of several of Shakespeare’s plays reveal myriad constructions of the female and her appropriate comportment, both through clothing and textual descriptions and admonitions. I identify four groups of women, and though I do not claim that this is a complete catalog, the characters contained herein represent the freedoms and dangers of women performing different versions of sexuality.

The first group consists of the “cross-dressers”: Julia, Viola, Portia, Nerissa, Rosalind, and Innogen. They are much less threatening than the next group, the usurpers, and Innogen is also a wrongly-accused good woman. Yet their mixture of visual transgression and idealized female behavior is highly intriguing. They frequently engage in the verbal freedom their male costume allows, but they never compromise their virtue. They each justify their transgressive action as a necessary act, and some of them express reluctance (some less convincingly than others). The cross-dressers demonstrate the strength of the female ideal and the extent to which it can and must be performed; it can trump clothing if acted powerfully enough.

Second are the “usurpers,” women like Queen Margaret, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra, who speak and act like men, participate in war and murder, and in the process throw gender definitions into disarray. They are not even recognizable as women: Queen Margaret is described as having a “tiger’s heart wrapt in a woman’s hide” (1.4.137) and Lady M famously begs to be unsexed altogether. Their transgressions of word and action remind audiences what women are not.

Third are the “good women,” virtuous maids such as Desdemona, Hero, and Innogen,
who are wrongly accused of being unfaithful. Their perceived infidelities render them equally as unwomanly as the usurpers. Even though their words and actual deeds protest their innocence, their imagined transgressions wield more power and condemn them. Again, there is a lack of agreement between words and appearances, which confuses the structure of the ideal woman and results in chaos.

The final group, however, takes advantage of the gaps between perception and reality to combine the verbal dexterity of the usurpers with the purity of the good women. The “shrews,” Kate and Beatrice, are witty and entertaining, but they are compared unfavorably to the good women with whom they share the stage, mild, well-mannered Bianca and Hero (respectively). They do not suffer punishment outright, although for years to come, critics will debate whether their marriages are rewards or retribution.

The system of gender coding was powerful enough to remain in force more than two hundred years later, when eighteenth-century writers used Shakespeare’s performative precedent to create characters who were chaste, but not docile. In the second chapter, “‘Such Perverse Obedience!’: Hannah Cowley’s Unconventionally Traditional Women,” I argue that women playwrights in particular manipulated the system of signs and codes, exploiting cross-dressing and other methods of disguise to both maintain the female ideal and question its validity. The chapter examines four plays by Hannah Cowley, one of the period’s most successful female playwrights, whose work often employs disguise or deceit to test the boundaries of female agency.

Plays under consideration include *The Belle’s Stratagem, Who’s the Dupe?*, *A School for
Greybeards, and A Bold Stroke for a Husband. In The Belle’s Stratagem, Letitia Hardy proves the importance of performance to the formation of a marriage, as she assumes more than one persona in her quest to win the heart of the man to whom she is betrothed. Her sexual desire is constrained within the bounds of propriety, as she is pursuing a man her father has chosen for her. Remarkable, though, is the fact that she is able to express this desire at all and that she displays a great amount of agency in the pursuit of it. She simultaneously submits to patriarchal rule while she asserts her own will.

Elizabeth, the heroine of Who’s the Dupe?, directs the performances of others more than she engages in it herself, but like Letitia, she is both submissive and active. Her father has decided that she should marry a learned man, and he has chosen a candidate. Elizabeth, however, is in love with a soldier, so she disguises him as a scholar and tricks the academic into presenting himself as a dandy. Her father thus orders her to marry the man she wanted all along. Cowley thus demonstrates that performance allows women to exert some control over their lives, even if they are not the ones doing the acting.

A School for Greybeards tackles marriage itself, supporting the emerging model of a companionate union and discouraging uneven marches, particularly those between older men and younger women. Disguise and performance are used to help unite a pair of young lovers and preserve the woman from an unappealingly elder husband, and Seraphina, the primary orchestrator of events, delivers more than one defense of female virtue, which she claims is independent of men’s influence.

Bold Stroke borrows more directly from Shakespeare, appropriating not only his signs for
women, but also his shrew and cross-dresser. Olivia pretends to be as tempestuous as the
infamous Kate, a resemblance noted by characters in the play, and only ends the performance
when her father presents a man with whom she is already in love. Just like Elizabeth from Who’s
the Dupe?, she follows her father’s instructions, but only after ensuring that the orders are to her
liking. The play’s second plot follows Olivia’s cousin Victoria, a wronged wife who transgresses
the limits of feminine behavior and dresses as a man to woo her husband’s mistress away from
him. The shocking scene of a woman in man’s clothing seducing another woman is made
permissible by the motive: a wife may do anything to preserve her family unit. Cowley thus
seems to present a portrait of the socially-approved devoted wife, but within the recognizable
form of a “woman,” she has hidden a vibrant sexual being with dangerously unconventional
abilities.

Cowley’s heroines exhibit a kind of respectable rebellion. Any potentially troubling
actions they take, such as Letitia’s coquettish behavior at a masked ball or Victoria’s seduction of
another woman, are excused: Letitia is flirting with her fiance, though he doesn’t know it, and
Victoria is ultimately maintaining the stability of the institution of marriage. Like Shakespeare’s
good women and cross-dressers, Cowley’s characters remain recognizable as women even as
they act in unconventional ways. Using performance, they could push against the boundaries of
acceptable conduct and question the validity of the limits placed upon them.

The third chapter, “The Role of the Wife: Courtship, Marriage, and Advice Literature,”
establishes a link between eighteenth-century conduct manuals, theatre, and novels, which all
worked to construct the female ideal. The manuals themselves crossed generic lines by taking the
form of collections of articles and essays from fiction and periodicals, letters from mentors to their young charges, sample conversations, and brief play scripts.

The volumes studied in this chapter, all drawn from the collection of the Chawton House Library in England, devote serious attention to the issue of marriage and women’s role in it. Significantly, women were permitted to participate in the selection of a husband, and many books encouraged them to take an active and thoughtful part in the process. Women were advised to be careful, to look for men of similar age, rank, and fortune, and to avoid hasty decisions. A young lady should never flirt or play the coquette, and she should never tell a man she cares for him until he has made his intentions clear (and then only if his intentions are honorable, of course).

The courtship depicted in many of the books is a curious blend of docility and performance. Men are assigned the more active role of choosing, but women retain the right of refusal, and until they have made their decision, they must give a performance calibrated to encourage without promising and dismiss without scandal. One book, *The Science of Love*, provides sample letters and scripts as a model for young lovers unsure of their lines. The performative elements of the ritual of courtship are thus tacitly acknowledged and strengthened.

Conduct manuals were concerned with making sure young ladies formed appropriate attachments, and their interest did not wane after vows were exchanged. Writers demonstrated the benefits of performance in the maintenance of home life as well. Women were counseled on ways to change a husband’s mind while giving the impression that the ideas were his alone. Advice was given on proper behavior in the presence of his friends and the avoidance of
potentially compromising appearances. Wives were cautioned against being lazy in their relationships; vigilance was called for at all times.

Many authors suggested that a woman could best hold the interest of her husband if she was well-educated and able to converse with him as an equal. Some essays criticized the state of female education, disparaging the “accomplishments” of drawing and dancing, which were of little value in intellectual discussions. It is possible that the writers themselves were engaging in a performance of their own here, hiding a sincere desire for useful education behind a rationale that would be nonthreatening and supportive of the stable marriage and family for which women were held responsible. Like Hannah Cowley’s characters, who participated in patriarchal structures willingly, but on their own terms, these writers seem to encourage a respectable rebellion, one that followed the rules and suggested change simultaneously.

The final chapter, “Training to be a Heroine: Jane Austen’s Performing Women,” argues that the novels of Jane Austen contain layers of performance similar to those found on both the Shakespearean and eighteenth-century stages. A significant factor in the growth and development of many of the main characters over the course of their novel is their ability to understand performance, in themselves and others, its benefits and its dangers. Austen offers a highly nuanced view of marriage and society, pointing to Cowley-like opportunities of advantage and acknowledging the moments when no amount of performance is adequate to persuade.

The two novels under consideration here, Sense and Sensibility and Northanger Abbey, feature heroines who are navigating the rules of society and trying to understand the role performance plays in personal relationships. Both Marianne Dashwood and Catherine Morland
must learn to read other people and discern necessary social performances from deceit. Both of them are highly influenced by the books they read, novels of sensibility in Marianne’s case and Gothic romances in Catherine’s. They try to apply what they have read to their own real-life situations, but seldom meet with success.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne seems to have a foil in her elder sister Elinor. It is not so much their temperaments that Austen contrasts, but their abilities to read and enact performances. Elinor is a consummate performer, hiding her feelings for Edward until the last few pages and keeping numerous secrets. She adheres to the rule repeated by many conduct book writers and does not admit a preference for Edward until he has made his own intentions clear. She studies the behavior of the people around her like an ensemble actor taking cues from the others in the company. Yet no one ever accuses her of being false or deceptive. She is trusted, as is evidenced by the secrets with which others burden her. In Austen’s hands, performance is both a blessing and a curse; Elinor’s performance might keep her safe from gossip and probably does help ensure her marriage to the man she loves, but it dooms her to months of silent, lonely agony before that happy day arrives.

Marianne claims to behave perfectly naturally, but she has in fact learned her part from her sensibility novels. She knows the role of romantic heroine and with what abandon she should lose herself in her courtship with Willoughby. Her seeming lack of performance does not guarantee her happiness with her first love, but it does with her second. Her inability to “love by halves,” her awareness of the passion she should feel, helps her love Colonel Brandon and live a contented life with him” (n.pag.).
Similarly, Catherine Morland understands the part a Gothic heroine must play and what adventures she can expect to encounter. This expertise serves little purpose in the polite society of Bath, and she learns, through trials very different from secret passageways and haunted castles, to recognize the performances of the people around her. Like Marianne, she must adjust her own actions to fit the story she is really in, but she maintains the independence of spirit and determination that governed her before.

For these heroines, it is not just in performance itself (i.e., their own actions) that they find power; almost as crucial is their ability to correctly interpret the performances of others. Elinor, Marianne, and Catherine, like many other Austen heroines, learn to distinguish between malicious deception and required social performance. They acknowledge both the limits and the freedoms performance affords.

Together, these chapters establish a strong partnership between theatre, conduct manuals, and novels. In particular, an engagement with issues of performance and womanhood indicates a deep concern with the way society perceived and interpreted the union of the two. The messages communicated in the texts is seldom absolute and clear. Some conduct books, while strictly advising wives to submit to their husbands and make the home so appealing that he will never want to leave it to go carousing with friends, also provide tips on how to act one way when thinking the opposite. More extreme acts of transgression, such as Cowley’s cross-dressing heroine, are rationalized by the need to restore the husband to his wife.

What is clear, therefore, is the lack of consensus on how women should act—all that was agreed upon was that they should act. Borrowing from yet another century, a scene from the film
The Philadelphia Story (1940) seems to illustrate the conundrum. Caught in what seems to be a compromising position the night before her wedding to George, Tracy agrees with him when he evinces a desire that his wife should “behave herself, naturally,” whereupon her first husband tries to make a point by removing the comma: “behave herself naturally.” Butler would object, asserting, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (“Performative Acts,” 282). Eighteenth-century writers seem aware that there was no “natural,” and they carefully laid out guidelines, fussing over details, making amendments, suggesting loopholes, coaching women on how to become women.

Careful examinations of the writers’ efforts reveal myriad confusions and disagreements that were sometimes solved, and sometimes complicated, by performance. Many writers, particularly those who penned conduct books, seem to ignore their own inconsistencies and gestures toward the performative, but others, like Cowley and Austen, pointed out the social performances that dictated women’s lives. Only by considering all three in concert—plays, conduct manuals, and novels—can the woman emerge, in all her imagined renderings and infinite performances.

“One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.”

—Simone de Beauvoir
Chapter 1

“Who Is ‘t Can Read a Woman?”: Sexual Identity on Shakespeare’s Stage

Lady Macbeth’s plea to “unsex me here” might be echoed by every woman on Shakespeare’s stage, and demonstrated as well. There were, of course, no women (in the anatomical sense) on Shakespeare’s stage, making Lady M’s invocation unnecessary and, technically, emasculating. Although the women’s roles were played by adolescent boys, the audience was able to see women in their stead. The players and playwright provided copious clues to aid the deception, from visually obvious markers such as clothing, to detailed verbal descriptions of a woman’s appropriate behavior. Thus the theatre indicated that the presence of a woman was not required for a woman to be presented.

Sue-Ellen Case discusses the semiotics of such a system, observing that “social conventions about the female gender will be encoded in all signs for women” (144). She continues, “A live woman standing on the stage is not a biological or natural reality...the conventions of the stage produce a meaning for the sign ‘woman’, which is based upon their cultural associations with the female gender” (145). Following this line of reasoning back to the Shakespearean stage, it might be concluded that not only is a “live woman standing on the stage” not a reality, but is also not a necessity. If all that is required to transmit “woman” is a collection of signs, established by, transmitted through, and received by what Case refers to as the

---

3 Hearing of the deceitful nature of his now-dead queen, Cymbeline marvels, “O most delicate fiend! / Who is ‘t can read a woman?” (Cymbeline 5.4.47-48). He then inadvertently describes the puzzle faced by all characters on Shakespeare’s stage: “Mine eyes / Were not in fault for she was beautiful, / Mine ears that heard her flattery, nor any heart / That thought her like her seeming. It had been vicious / To have mistrusted her” (5.4.62-66).
“dominant ideology,” such roles could be, and were, played by anyone, including young boys.

As early modern society sought to establish definitions of “male” and “female” that were God-given, fixed, and immutable, theatre reflected the instability of these divisions, and of identity itself. Jean E. Howard describes the stage as not only being “connected with the loss or confusion of identity, but also with usurpation, seizing a social position which one does not, by one’s birth, deserve, aspiring to an identity which can therefore be discredited as illusory, counterfeit, deceptive” (n.pag.). Anti-theatrical writers and lecturers warned against the sins of performing in or attending plays and participating in activities that seemed designed to defy the hierarchy of society as set out by God. Even playwrights who represented “the feminine according to the preconceptions of contemporary discourse” could not be trusted, reports Eric A. Nicholson (296). Markers of sexual identity were presented as recognizable yet unreliable as “even the more stereotypical figures, simply by coming onstage, speaking, and affecting the play’s action, sometimes belied the models of inferiority or subservience they were supposed to represent” (Nicholson 296). The stage, by employing action and costume to transit the codes for “woman,” helped reinforce the ideal; however, the fact that womanhood could be so easily constructed and dismantled indicated that markers of sexuality might not be natural and essential after all.

This chapter examines the two primary methods used to establish sexual identity on Shakespeare’s stage: costume and activity (expressed through language and behavior). Neither could communicate the complete female ideal alone, and although they sometimes worked together, they often contradicted each other, presenting the costume of one sex and the behavior
of the other. What emerged on stage was both a reinforcement of the evolving female ideal and a willingness to question its validity; this duality was so engrained in theatrical methodology that its influence continued to be felt into the eighteenth century, as will be shown in subsequent chapters. The discussion here is less concerned with considering Stephen Orgel’s question about why audiences took boys for women⁴ than it is with uncovering how women were presented to audiences, how sexuality was communicated, and how theatrical representations of supposedly natural feminine qualities instead served to demonstrate the ways in which they could be constructed and manipulated.

Some critics have argued about the constructed nature of female roles that were played by men. David Mann questions the approach of The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare and what he describes as an effort “to liberate imaginary characters not only from critical misinterpretations but also from Shakespeare too”(57). He argues that the stage provided counsel on how to be a “good woman,” but he resists readings that to him, seem to ignore the cultural situation in which the plays were created and performed. Other critics, however, have focused on the male body beneath the female attire and identified homosexual desire between the actors and the audience. Phyllis Rackin complicates this reading by drawing attention to “the exotic excitement that cross-dressed characters...could elicit from both characters and spectators of both sexes. This excitement, like the ambiguous gender identity of the characters themselves, resist analysis in terms of the modern division between homo- and heteroerotic (or even bisexual) desire. It derives from the very ambiguity that those classifications would dismantle”

She describes theatrical cross-dressing as an artistic accomplishment that the audience appreciated and enjoyed on many levels.

Jean E. Howard sees social disruption as inseparable from the practice of cross-dressing, saying that it “threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which woman’s subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike” (n.pag.). She notes the importance of dress as a signifier of rank and sex.

There is little consensus on why women were not allowed on the English stage while they were in other European countries; why audiences were so willing to accept young men as women; what audiences thought about the practice; and whether Shakespeare’s female characters (or indeed any of his characters) were meant to truthfully convey his or his culture’s attitudes toward women. Some critics interpret as misogyny the lack of female bodies onstage and the harsh treatment of characters like Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*, Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, whose father threatens her with death if she refuses to marry the man of his choosing. Yet other critics praise determined and strong women like Cleopatra, Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. The only thing that is certain is that there were and there were not women on Shakespeare’s stage.

This chapter explores both sides of that statement in two related sections. The first section delineates the importance of clothing and the way it helped establish early modern social and sexual hierarchies. As Michael Shapiro has pointed out, the theatrical practice of cross-dressing demonstrated that such a structure, because it could be duplicated and disrupted, was not
infallibly stable: “Whether femininity in the social world was an essential or constructed phenomenon, its representation on stage was obviously the result of theatrical artifice” (41). If clothing could create kings out of commoners and women out of men, the possibility of an arbitrary element to the system was difficult to ignore, much to the alarm of anti-theatre pamphleteers.

The second section examines a selection of Shakespeare’s plays, investigating the language and actions that worked with and against clothing to indicate a woman’s sexual identity. Shakespeare’s female characters are usually verbally aware of their position in society and the reasons for that placement. They frequently comment on or contest sexual stratification, either by acting like a shrew, dressing like a man, or demanding to be unsexed altogether. In each case, the clothing contradicts the sexual identity it is meant to establish, undermining its position as signifier while the action explores the social construct under threat.

I. The Sex of Clothes

Clothing on the Elizabethan stage established character, but it could be an unreliable indicator. Many of Shakespeare’s plays contain themes of disguise, and when characters hide their true identities, they frequently announce the reasons for the subterfuge either before the transformation occurs or when they emerge onstage in uncharacteristic clothing, and sometimes they do both. This device could be for the benefit of audience members far from the stage, but it also demonstrates a distrust of clothing’s communicative efficiency. Even as costumes were used to distinguish noble from peasant and man from woman, they were inherently unstable. It is,
after all, a handkerchief that damns Othello’s innocent Desdemona, and in Cymbeline, a nightgown askew provides Iachimo a glimpse of Innogen’s nearly-fatal mole.\footnote{A detailed investigation of Desdemona, Innogen, and their surrounding fabrics can be found in chapter 4 of Susan Frye’s Pens and Needles: Woman’s Textualities in Early Modern England (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).}

The danger of these shifting signifiers was not lost on some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Philip Stubbes’s The Anatomy of Abuses delivered a clear assessment of the purpose and function of clothing from a very practical moral standpoint: “Our apparell was given as a sign distinctive, to discern betwixt sexe and sexe, and therefore one to wear the apparell of an other sexe, is to participate with the same and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde” (38). Stubbes, who had no affection for the theatre regardless, seems primarily worried about the truth, “the veritie.” People should not pretend to be what they are not, lest they “adulterate” (with its biblical connotations of the seventh commandment, infidelity, and punishment) the facts of their own sex. There is also a sense that the sexes are linked, almost like a see-saw or a set of scales—any instability in one threatens the other. If men dressed like women, they were undermining the hierarchy as a whole, both their own masculinity and the femininity of the women whose raiment they assumed. Clothing is elevated to a body part, or visible genitalia, responsible for determining a person’s sex. In Stubbes’s paradigm, a man who dons a woman’s clothes may as well castrate himself, rendering himself neither man nor woman and thus a danger to both.

However, Marjorie Garber warns against a reckless transference of modern society’s concerns about sexuality and gender onto Elizabethan culture. She points out that while church leaders such as Stubbes had biblically-influenced anxieties about men and women, “sumptuary laws primarily regulated status rather than gender infractions”; what she terms the “transvestite
effect” becomes an index of “displacement, substitution, or slippage: from class to gender, gender to class; or, equally plausibly, from gender to race or religion” (36, 36-7). She identifies the transvestite as “both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification...For the transvestite is there and gone at once. Nobody gets ‘Cesario’ (or ‘Ganymede’), but ‘Cesario’ (or ‘Ganymede’) is necessary to falling in love. The transvestite on the Renaissance stage, in fact, is not merely a signifier, but also a function” (37). These characters are a conduit, a mechanism for transferring emotions (and meanings) between confused lovers, a task Rosalind makes literal when, as Ganymede, she instructs Orlando to call her Rosalind; although she is ostensibly curing him of his love-sickness by redirecting his energy to an inappropriate target (a youth named Ganymede), she is actually testing his devotion and reinforcing his passion.

Significantly, both characters Garber cites as examples, Cesario and Ganymede, are not, on the Elizabethan stage, transvestites. They are at that point male characters being played by male actors. It is the woman, more than the transvestite, that is “there and gone at once”: beneath the male garb, supposedly, are Viola and Rosalind, yet no biological women are there. Instead, the male actors create what I would call an “invisible transvestite,” as the memory of a woman from the early scenes of the play attempts to hover, phantom-like, between the layers of maleness present when a boy plays a woman who is playing a boy.

In fact, Phyllis Rackin theorizes that these roles allowed actors to “celebrate the mystery of theatrical impersonation, which enabled both the represented character and the representing actor to be simultaneously present to the audience in the artful person of a single performer”
Invisibility can be interpreted as a freedom or a trap—is the transgressive woman smothered and extinguished between the layers of the male actor and the male disguise of her character, or does she have unprecedented license to act like a man even though she is a woman? Critics do not agree. David Mann contends that “a female character in breeches is likely to be presented as more conventionally feminine than one in female dress” in an effort to maintain her ability to be recognized as a woman despite the male actor’s male clothing (50). This suggests that a female character’s transgressive behavior results in even more limitations on her conduct than she might usually encounter. However, Paula S. Berggren takes the opposite view, noting, “By obscuring their own sex, the heroines gain extraordinary access to the men they love” (22). Cross-dressing gives the female characters greater power and freedom of movement, and it is the promise of safe travel that compels Julia, Viola, Rosalind, and Innogen to assume male disguise.

The assumption of male clothing seems also to give the women characters who wear it verbal freedom as well. Portia disguises herself as a lawyer not to be near her lover, but to save his friend by employing legal rhetoric that surpasses that of the men in court, men who would not have listened to her had she entered dressed as a woman. Her words save Antonio’s life, but the words are made stronger by the male garments that validate their authority. Even disguised
women with less at stake enjoy a little verbal repartee. Michael Shapiro traces the evolution of the “‘saucy lackey,’ the kind of precociously witty boy servant who had already become a stock character on the Elizabethan stage” through Julia and Viola’s stints as “cheeky pages,” though he also points out that in these cases, “Adoption of disguise also implied the inevitability of undisguising, and with it the assurance that even the most assertive heroine...would eventually resume her female identity and her place within a patriarchal society” (65). Similarly, Clare Claibourne Park understands cross-dressed heroines as comforting to the audience, which knows that the outspoken young woman is only “playing a role”; without male clothing, “feminine assertiveness is viewed with hostility, as with Kate the Shrew, or at best, as with Beatrice, as less than totally positive. Male dress transforms what otherwise could be experienced as aggression into simple high spirits” (108). The invisible transvestite thus conceals female transgression, cloaking it in male clothing.

In his study of costuming on the early modern stage, Robert I. Lublin announces, “the costumes were the characters” (4). This assessment, by necessity, must extend to non-theatrical situations as well—if the audience was expected to recognize the costumes as indictors of the identities of their wearers, a referent would need to have been established already and understood, or the signs transmitted by the clothing would fail. A formula emerges here, one that inextricably links identity, clothing, and performance: Clothing is required to perform an identity. The idea that identity is something performed and able to be assumed and discarded at will was what Stubbes, his fellow polemists, and the authors of the sumptuary laws were attempting to combat by dictating who could wear what when. The theatre only served to demonstrate publicly,
and to popular acclaim, that the officials and sermonizers were wrong.

Like the transvestite, clothing could be described in Garber’s terms, as “both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification” (37). To state the obvious, a transvestite depends on clothing to establish an identity, using apparel to construct a new appearance. Although Elizabethans accepted that clothing and other worn objects indicated the wearer’s sex, they were not all of them entirely comfortable with the notion that these definers of sex and status could be transferred. “To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society; to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes,” Thomas Laqueur has observed, arguing that in the Renaissance, biology was less a consideration in the determination of what we would call gender than was social standing (8). “A penis was thus a status symbol rather than a sign of some other deeply rooted ontological essence: real sex. It could be construed as a certificate of sorts, like the diploma of a doctor or lawyer today, which entitled the bearer to certain rights and privileges” (134-5). Just as we frown upon falsified credentials, Elizabethans expected the twin lines of sex and status to be honored. Laqueur describes a “one-sex model,” in which men and women were biologically only different in that men’s genitals were worn outside the body while women’s were turned inward. Seen as a status symbol rather than an alignment of chromosomes, sex, like class, was ordered by a strict hierarchy that was threatened any time someone wore the wrong clothes.

According to Stubbes, clothing was an extension and an advertisement of sex and status, and, as Dympna Callaghan explains, “To divest oneself of the appropriate social signifiers is to
alter one’s essence, to adulterate God-given nature.” The theatrical transvestite demonstrated that clothing, because it could be be used to change an actor’s appearance, was not the fixed determinate of sex that Stubbes would have it be. And if clothing was unreliable, the concept of “woman” could be equally—and even more problematically—undecidable, threatening not only Stubbes’ orthodoxy, but also the entire social structure.

Perhaps more than any of Shakespeare’s other plays, *Cymbeline* demonstrates the inseparability of identity, performance, and clothing. Innogen, in an angry speech repulsing the advances of her step-brother Cloten, nearly conflates her husband Posthumus with his attire as she declares: “...His meanest garment, / That ever hath but clipp’d his body, is dearer / In my respect than all the hairs above thee” (2.3.130-32). Through the remainder of the scene, Cloten echoes the word “garment” four times, and later decides to pursue Innogen (who has fled after her husband), dress in Posthumus’s clothes, and rape her.

By assuming the clothing of Posthumus, Cloten also hopes to take on his identity; he succeeds in this part of his plan, as Innogen does indeed mistake him for Posthumus, but he is dead and unable to enjoy his victory. Cloten has been beheaded, so it is by clothing alone that Innogen believes she recognizes her husband: “The garments of Posthumus! / I know the shape of’s leg: this is his hand; / His foot Mercurial; his Martial thigh;/ The brawns of Hercules...” (4.2.309-12). From the brief mention of his garments, Innogen continues to catalog other body parts that, because of the clothing, seem familiar and establish identity. It takes only the clothing of Posthumus to imbue Cloten, who has proven himself earlier in the play to be a blustering

---

6 For longer discussions of clothing and identity in *Cymbeline*, see Stephen Orgel’s *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England* and Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass’s *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*. 
coward (most notably in Act 1, scene 2), with godly traits of strength and bravery. Clothing, when transferred from one person to another, seems capable of carrying with it every aspect of identity, from name to personality to physical characteristics, so that Cloten, who must have always borne some resemblance to Posthumus, is now praised for thighs, hands, and feet that Innogen previously despised.

Innogen, awakening from a drugged sleep in unfamiliar surroundings to find a headless corpse beside her, might be excused for her folly, but such a case of hidden identity is not the only one in the play. Innogen has disguised herself as a boy in order to travel alone safely, and her own father fails to recognize her in the revelatory final scene, even when the two converse quietly apart from the crowd. Then, when she joyously encounters her living husband, he cannot see past her clothing and strikes her to the ground. Only Pisanio, the faithful servant, knows who she is, perhaps because he was the one who costumed her. The audience, aware of the disguise, accepted the ignorance of the other characters because it accurately reflected their own understanding of the power of clothing to confuse identity; the stage was, as it were, already set.

Clothing so completely replaces an original identity in Shakespeare that it is not uncommon for close relatives or married couples to be unable to see anything else. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind reports having conversations with her father in the guise of Ganymede; *Twelfth Night*’s Viola and Sebastian go to comical lengths to establish each other as the lost twin; and during the courtroom scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia and Nerissa dupe their husbands into believing they are lawyers (although in this case, their flair for courtroom rhetoric is likely to have been at least as convincing as their garb; the use of language to indicate gender will be
discussed later in the chapter). These mistakes become even more convincing when clothing equates anatomy, particularly in the cases of the cross-dressed heroines. The deception operates on two levels. First, clothing is believed to establish identity incontrovertibly, and second, when the other characters look at a female disguised as a young man, they are truly seeing a male.

Judith Butler argues that transvestitism is less threatening on stage than it is off because the audience can tell the difference between theatre and reality: “In the theatre, one can say, ‘this is just an act’...Because of this distinction, one can maintain one’s sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements” (“Performative Acts,” 278). While this may be true today, the reasoning cannot necessarily be applied wholesale to Elizabethan audiences. That they possessed the ability to distinguish between theatre and real life is indisputable; that each realm was governed by distinct and separate sets of rules is less certain. But crucially, Butler goes on to point out:

Gender reality is performative...[The] implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known. If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. (“Performative Acts,” 278–79)

This is an argument that Stubbes surely would have found appalling. Since he, and many others, believed that differences between the sexes were delineated by God, suggesting that they could be assumed, performed, shifted, and traded was heretical. In this way, there was no real difference between theatre and real life. Regardless of place or circumstance, a transgression
remained a transgression, and that is why theatre was so disturbing (or exhilarating): according to the structure described by Stubbes, if clothing was an intrinsic and inseparable signifier of sex, men who dressed like women became women, which was a violation of God’s will. Jean E. Howard explains that “clothes distinguished one social group from those both above and below; they were precise indicators of status and degree. To transgress the codes governing dress disrupted an official view of the social order in which one’s identity was largely determined by one’s station of degree—and where that station was, in theory, providentially determined and immutable” (n.pag.). Therefore, clothing was a key factor in the performance of sex, since a person’s garments were interpreted as acts or gestures that constructed sex. A link to speech act theory, as explained by J.L. Austin, is also clear here, since speaking, or in this case, putting on the clothes, wearing a particular costume, makes a thing so.

For Austin, a “performative” is when “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (5). He cites examples such as marriage ceremonies, ship christenings, wills, and wagers, in which the pronouncement of words such as “I take thee for my wife,” “I christen this ship,” “I bequeath,” and “I bet” perform the action the words speak of. Shannon Jackson explains that these acts “don’t simply reflect a world,” but have “the power to make a world” (2). Thus, as a wedding ceremony makes a woman a wife and a man a husband, clothing created a world in which boys are women. When an actor put on a dress and wig, he was both announcing and doing the act of becoming a woman. As James Loxley elaborates, “there is no separation...between utterance and situation. The utterance is not setting out to describe a situation, an event or an action: it is an event or an action” (8). The physical action of donning
the costume becomes and replaces speech, performing and doing. An actor did not need to announce verbally, “Now I am a woman,” because the costume stated the fact for him.7

The clothes, already sexualized, aided and enacted the performance. This is due to what Stephen Orgel calls “cultural assumptions about costume” (103-4), while Lublin explains, “The articles of apparel that an actor wore in performance did more than reveal his character’s sex. They materially constructed the wearer’s femininity or masculinity according to the gendered assumptions that were maintained at the time. A doublet and hose...were understood to be male before they were put on” (24). Critically, the clothes themselves are already sexed. The wearer thus becomes that sex by donning the clothes—the sexual identity and the clothes are inseparable, rendering anatomy, as Laqueur has pointed out, negligible. In this scenario, sex is entirely performative; actors chose a sex by putting on the appropriate costume.

Another pamphleteer, John Rainolds, seems to have recognized this formula, as he pleaded for the overthrow of the playhouses: “For the apparell of women is a great provocation of men to lust and leacherie: because a womans garment being put on a man doeth vehemently touch and move him with the remembrance and imagination of a woman; and the imagination of a thing desirable doth stir up the desire” (97). He is clearly disturbed by the erotic potential of clothing. He does not seem to believe that men will be attracted to other men; rather, the danger lies in the clothes they wear—the clothes that summon the memory of something not actually there, but still powerful enough to transform, seduce, and corrupt. It is the clothes themselves

7 Characters in disguise did frequently remind the audience of their true identity, particularly heroines who were dressed as men. Other characters who identify themselves might do so for the benefit of spectators far from the stage or to clear up any doubt that might arise from the custom of doubling (one actor playing more than one role).
that spark desire, not the wearer. The costumes are so closely aligned with sex identification that the two are not easily disentangled, and desire can be erroneously applied to the wearer of the clothes without any regard for biology.

Biological sex, according to Laqueur, was “just as much in the domain of culture and meaning as was gender” (134). The two “social sexes” were assigned different tasks and roles and corresponded “to ranges or bands, higher and lower, on the corporal scale of being,” and the division between the two was “construed as natural” (134). If the two sexes were thus naturally identified and separated, any violation of the boundaries was sinful and dangerous. Sex needed to be essential and divinely conferred in order for what Howard calls “languages of difference” to be effective: “Men and women were first and foremost described as dominant and subservient, perfect and less perfect, fit for rule and unfit for rule.” It fell to society to maintain and reinforce the differences—and their necessity—by claiming that transgression was harmful. Clothing marked out the wearer’s place on the scale, reflecting and establishing identity.

Similarly, in Rainolds’ formula, while desire is excited by the costume, clothing is in fact a representation. Not the objects of desire themselves, they communicate the idea of “woman” so effectively that they stir up “the remembering and imagination of a woman.” Peggy Phelan has observed that “Representation...always conveys more than it intends...it fails to reproduce the real exactly...The real is read through representation, and repetition is read through the real” (2). By reading the costumes as representations of “woman,” the audiences inevitably read their wearers as women. The result is the invisible transvestite—not a man wearing a woman’s dress, but a woman’s dress, being worn by someone who is therefore a woman. Orsino, though
speaking of two separate people (Viola and Sebastian), perhaps summarizes the ghostly proclivity of the woman and the transvestite on Shakespeare’s stage: “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!” (Twelfth Night, 5.1.207-8)

II. Acting Like a Woman

Although clothing was a powerful indicator of identity in general and an integral contributor to the presentation of “woman,” Shakespeare’s text shared the responsibility for delineating what a woman was (and should be). Both costumes and language performed the dual task of strengthening and weakening the social construct of sexual identity. While writers like Stubbes and Rainolds worked hard to assert the need to maintain clothing as reliable indicators, the stage capitalized on that premise—that costumes would allow audience members to recognize characters accurately—while it violated the spirit of the law by dressing men in attire that did not align with who they really were. Language and action helped reinforce sexual identity by praising well-behaved women and scolding the bad, but it also frequently violated the message transmitted by the clothing. Thus costume and behavior often appear to be carrying out a symbolic debate about what makes a woman (or a man) a woman.

Eric A. Nicholson, aided by the Duke from Measure for Measure, describes the three stages of a woman’s life: maid, wife, and widow. He points out that these designations depend upon a woman’s relation to a man, but observes that many female characters “who preserve their virginity or sexual honor...at the same time assert their ability to play roles usually reserved to men” (302). Transgressive behavior takes place among women who wear men’s clothing and
among those who rely only on strength of character to enact their independence.

Examining Shakespeare’s women by their actions, four categories emerge; significantly, although the groups are less obviously linked to men as the maid, wife, and widow structure is, the divisions remain informed by the degree to which the women adhere to or violate the ideal. First, there are the “cross-dressers”: Julia, Viola, Portia, Nerissa, Rosalind, and Innogen. Whether they assume a disguise for love or safety (or a combination of the two), their conduct remains above reproach. Second are the “good women,” paragons of virtue such as Desdemona, Innogen, and Hero, who, despite doing everything they should, are accused of being unfaithful (and thus unwomanly), with results that range from troubling to tragic. The third group is as verbally dextrous as the cross-dressers, but lack their protective disguise. The “shrews,” Kate and Beatrice, use their tongues and wits as weapons, and they are shown in stark relief to mild, well-mannered Bianca and Hero. Lastly, there are the “usurpers,” women like Queen Margaret, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra, women who possess strength, cunning, and the ability to commit murder, or at least persuade men to do the deed in their stead.8

The behavior of women on stage worked alongside the powerful visual marker of clothing to establish a character’s position within the social and sexual hierarchy. But like clothing, action could be an unreliable indicator, and the two signifiers were often at odds with each other, challenging audience assumptions about both. The four behavioral groups outlined here describe women who cannot be contained, women who do not entirely fulfill the role

---

8 This is neither a comprehensive list of all of the women found in Shakespeare nor a complete catalog within the groups delineated here. Rather, these four broad groupings have been selected for their close alignment to the topic at hand, and the characters discussed possess conditions representative of all women who share their classification.
society has provided for their sex. Some of them break rules, ostensibly demonstrating the necessity of regulation, but others transgress in more subtle (or entirely imaginary) ways. Regardless of the impetus or the result, the actions themselves point to the instability of the female ideal and question the criteria used to construct a woman.

Six of Shakespeare’s women spend some significant amount of time as males: Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Innogen in *Cymbeline*. In these cases, language and behavior, rather than reinforcing the visual markers of costumes, contradicted them and asserted the characters’ virtuous and womanly traits, but in very subtle ways. When the actors playing these roles assumed their characters’ disguises, they returned to their own natural state of maleness. The clothes indicated “man,” so the actors had to rely entirely on language to maintain the femininity that was supposed to lie hidden beneath their clothing. A boy playing a girl who was pretending to be a boy looked remarkably like a boy, so all that was left to summon the image of the invisible transvestite was words and deeds, which often did more to complicate the situation than clarify it. Clothing was purposefully an unreliable indicator of sex, and audiences were asked to believe not what they saw, but what they heard. As discussed in the first section, female characters in male disguise usually enjoyed greater verbal freedom than they would have as women. They became cheeky pages and brilliant lawyers; they dressed like men and they talked like men.

However, their honor and chastity remained intact. Many of them dress as men so that
they can travel in safety—a reminder of how dangerous men can be. Many of them prove to be more reliable and faithful than the men they love (Innogen’s selection of the name “Fidele” is no accident). Their words and dress might make them men, but they perform the chastity and goodness of women.

In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia adopts the disguise of a page so she can travel alone to be with her lover, Proteus. Once she arrives in Milan, though, she discovers he is plotting to woo Silvia, and he enlists her service in the effort. Entering his service as Sebastian, Julia never ceases to remind the audience of her true womanly identity; she has a series of asides in which she laments Proteus’ fickleness as he serenades Silvia, and when they discuss a gift he asks Sebastian to deliver to Silvia, she chastises him for forgetting the woman who gave it to him originally. The embodiment of true obedience, she argues with herself about where her loyalty rests: “I am my master’s true-confirmed love; / But cannot be true servant to my master, / Unless I prove false traitor to myself” (4.4.64-66). But the only way she could betray herself and fail to live up to her status of “woman” would be to disobey.

Julia need not have worried. Silvia remains true to the banished Valentine and pours out an abundance of sisterly pity for the poor wronged Julia. Keeping Julia a topic of conversation allows her to maintain a presence on stage even as Sebastian’s male costume threatens to erase the memory of her female form. Sebastian speaks of Julia in the third person, but the lines carry a double meaning, which allies the audience to her by reminding them of the secret they alone share with her. She responds to Silvia’s pity by saying first, “She thanks you,” and then corrects herself, “I thank you, madam, that you tender her”; she answers Silvia’s question about whether
she knows the lady, “Almost as well as I do know myself” (4.4.100, 102, 105).

While Julia makes certain that the audience remembers her identity throughout the play, none of the other characters realize the truth until she announces it. They are all reunited in the forest, and she faints when Valentine renounces his claim on Silvia in favor of Proteus. The swoon does not give her away—she has to refer to herself as Julia before Proteus recognizes her. Since nothing in her clothing or demeanor has changed, a transformative speech act must be performed in order for the other characters to see behind the identity established by the clothes, erasing Sebastian and restoring Julia. She asserts her adherence to the feminine ideal by commenting that “It is the lesser blot, modesty finds, / Women to change their shapes than men their minds” (5.4.17-18). Even when women alter their appearance, they remain women, and recognizable as such, by their fidelity.

Viola’s role of Cesario is closely aligned with Julia’s alter ego, Sebastian, though this slightly later play mines the wooing situation for more comedy than pathos. Dressed as “an eunuch” in order to move safely around the strange country of Illyria, Viola enters the service of Orsino and promptly falls in love with him (1.2.57). He sends her to make his suit to the obdurate Olivia, who in turn becomes smitten with Cesario (Cesario wishes her master no more success than Julia/Sebastian did in Two Gentlemen of Verona, but is spared the betrayal of professed and forgotten love Julia suffered). Since much of the amusement comes from a woman wooing a woman, Cesario’s true identity must be kept fresh in the audience’s mind. Orsino comments helpfully, “…Diana’s lip / Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe / Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.30-33). He is right
both in the context of the play and of the player. All is semblative: the dress the boy actor donned
to become a woman and the memory of that dress that makes him a woman still.

In Olivia’s presence, Viola seems to relish her masculine role, indulging in a somewhat
ceeky tone that provides a counterpoint to her more wistful scenes with Orsino. It may be this
duplicity that allows her to capture both hearts—with Olivia, she is a man, and with Orsino, she
is a woman. After discovering Olivia loves her, she laments,

Poor lady, she were better love a dream.
Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper-false
In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms!
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!
For such as we are made of, such we be. (2.2.224-30)

Although she admits the danger disguise can pose to others, she also believes in the
unchangeable self; whether dressed as a woman or a man, she is what she is made of, not what
makes her. The self she identifies is not one created from clothing, or even words or deeds. She
sees an immutable self that is “made” with a certain degree of “frailty,” which to her, is natural in
women and cannot be erased by her disguise, which even she seems unable to trust. Cesario has
become another character for Viola to reckon with; Cesario is a dream and a disguise, and
disguise can do wicked things that she, Viola, cannot control. As she detaches Viola from
Cesario (and thus disavows responsibility for his actions), she also separates women’s traits from
their selves. She blames “frailty, not we!” Even though she seems to enjoy her moments as a cheeky pages, she also acknowledges the limitations of her position and the inherent weaknesses that she accepts as inseparable from being a woman.

Cesario never forgets her female self, adopting Julia/Sebastian’s method of talking about her true identity in the third person. Whereas in Two Gentlemen of Verona, Julia becomes the mistress of her alter ego, Viola/Cesario becomes her own sister and brother.

My father had a daughter loved a man,
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship. …

I am all the daughters of my father’s house,
And all the brothers too … (2.4.105-7, 118-19)

It is a riddle to Orsino, but to the audience, the lines continue to establish Cesario as a woman, even as the costume indicates otherwise.

Cesario’s masquerade comes hilariously undone when she is called upon to duel with Sir Andrew, who believes her to be his rival for Olivia’s affections. As a well-brought-up gentlewoman, she knows nothing of fighting, and nothing proves a man less a man than a show of cowardice. She reminds the audience in an aside just why she does not want to fight: “Pray God defend me! A little thing would / make me tell them how much I lack of a man” (3.4.279-80). In every sense of the word, literal and phallic, she does not possess or know how to handle a sword. While Sir Andrew does little credit to his own sex, Cesario must appear, despite her clothes, as a woman in order to fully establish the absurdity of the situation. Her ineptitude and
unwillingness convinces the company she is not a man, but just a boy, and reminds the audience that she is a woman. Like Julia, Viola remains unrecognized until she reveals the truth, allowing her brother to embrace her (and confirm her femininity) and Orsino to admit he loves her, although he says he will continue to call her Cesario, “For so you shall be, while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino’s mistress and his fancy’s queen” (5.1.373-75).

Clearly, to Orsino, Viola is the sex of her clothing—he does not say “while you are dressed like man,” but “while you are a man.” Although she has gone to great pains to remain a woman throughout, behaving obediently to the man she loves, being faithful and as honest as she could be under the circumstances, in the end, clothes trump all and whatever inherent femininity she believed in is discounted and ignored until her clothes have done their perforative duty and made her a woman again.

In contrast, Portia and Nerissa strive to eradicate all traces of femininity and establish themselves firmly as men, both in the eyes of the company and in the minds of the audience, and though they dress and speak like men, they exhibit honor and fidelity similar to their cross-dressing sisters. In order to be taken seriously in a court of law, even a staged one, they need everyone to believe they are men. But they make sly, and probably disappointed, references to themselves when their husbands declare they would sacrifice everything they have, including their supposedly beloved wives, to save Antonio. Portia states, “Your wife would give you little thanks for that. / If she were by, to hear you make the offer” (4.1.288-289). The audience, in on the joke, can share the irony and sorrow of the moment. Her effectiveness as a lawyer lies primarily in her ability to shed her feminine traits and be convincingly masculine. She is, of
course, dressed for the part, wearing the apparel of a lawyer and is thus instantly taken for one by all in attendance. Neither she nor Nerissa are recognized by their husbands, even when close enough to accept the rings the men had sworn to them they would never part with.

Like Julia and Innogen, Portia and Nerissa reveal themselves as women by upholding the expectation that they be faithful by exceeding the fidelity of the men they follow. Portia is also staggeringly more clever than all the men in the courtroom, as it is she alone who hits upon the solution that saves Antonio’s life. “This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,” she tells Shylock, “The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’” (4.1.306-307). Her cunning wins the respect of everyone, though her earlier comments to Nerissa before they depart for Venice indicate that she doesn’t think men will be hard to fool. All she needs to be mistaken for a man is “a reed voice,” “a manly stride,” and “quaint lies”; “I have within my mind,” she continues, “A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks, / Which I will practise” (3.4.71-73, 80-82). She neatly bifurcates the female and the male, and men are not thought of too highly. Perhaps that is why Portia must intervene and save the day—men cannot be trusted with such important matters. Rather than asking her cousin, Doctor Bellario, to represent Antonio, she borrows lawyer’s robes from him and does the job herself. Although she drops one hint about her true sex, she clearly believes that only a woman can handle the case. Perhaps more than any of the other cross-dressing women, she relishes the power that comes with her disguise. After all, she has the ability to save one man’s life and ruin another’s. She discovers things about men she would not have known otherwise, and as her own interpretation of what it means to be a man exceeds the quality of the men around her, she undermines their masculinity.
While Portia and Nerissa allow their male disguise to overshadow the actors’ assumed femininity, Rosalind as Ganymede is frequently reminded of her disguise by her cousin Celia and her own heart. Like Julia, Viola, and Innogen, Rosalind dresses as a man so that she can travel safely. Unlike them, though, her secret is shared not only by the audience, but also by characters on stage. Her cousin Celia in particular operates as a foil, demonstrating what a woman looks like and teasing Ganymede about the masquerade.

Ganymede seems alternately to need reminding that she is a man and that he is a woman. Her first lines in disguise express her own battle between the clothes she wears and what she is underneath: “I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat...” (2.4.4-7). Although acknowledging that clothes are powerful signifiers of sex, she places them in opposition to her own words and actions, questioning which is the more reliable marker; the fact that this conundrum was being posed by a man dressed as a woman who was dressed as a man seemed to support both arguments for clothes and for language.

The play never quite answers the question, and Ganymede’s transformation never seems entirely complete. She refers to her clothing multiple times when discussing Orlando’s unexpected presence in the forest, telling Celia impatiently, “dost thou think, though I am caparisoned like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” (3.2.188-90) Now clothing is only skin deep, for while it may convince the world of the wearer’s sex, the person underneath remains unchanged, a woman with all attendant woman’s emotions, such as impatience, vanity—she asks if Orlando knows she is dressed like a man (a question Celia never answers)—and
impetuousness: “Do you not know I am a woman? when I think, I must speak” (3.2.241-42).

Ganymede must remain a woman in the audience’s mind, for Orlando woos and pretends to wed the pretty youth who has promised to cure Orlando of his love (though he professed no such desire). Ganymede is flippant and mischievous in her dealings with Orlando, finding fault with his protestations of love and displaying a skepticism concerning his more elaborate vows, telling him with none of a woman’s romanticism that “men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love” (4.1.97-98). Indeed, Celia accuses her, “You have simply misused our sex in your love-prate” (4.1.184). But Ganymede ignores her and rapturously declares her love for Orlando, which she claims, indulging in hyperbole she surely would have scolded him for, is as deep as the Bay of Portugal.

The shadow of the invented woman is never far from Ganymede. Even without the reminders from Celia, the device of having Orlando call Ganymede Rosalind (ostensibly part of the cure for love) is a constant guide to the audience, identifying an invisible sex that transcends clothing and allows a boy to be seen as a girl disguised as a boy. The trick seems to work on Orlando, as he Ganymede/Rosalind certainly does not cure him of his love. Other characters, however, have no problem seeing Ganymede as a young man—a love object in his own right, and a rival. As Olivia loved Cesario, Phoebe falls for Ganymede, despite “his” protestations and lack of interest. Neither words nor actions are enough to convince Phoebe. She believes in clothing, and obediently transfers her affection to Silvius when Rosalind reappears dressed as a woman at the play’s close.

As Ganymede, Rosalind has exerted remarkable power. She has brought together
numerous pairs of lovers and summoned a minor deity to bless their unions. She has won the love of man and woman, and she has preserved her own chastity throughout. Notably, throughout her exploits, she and the audience never forget that she is a woman. Ganymede is an act she is playing, and Rosalind possesses the heart of a woman. She makes distinctions between what she considers natural female reactions and Ganymede’s cheeky descriptions of them, in the process separating Rosalind from Ganymede. Although Rosalind is the invisible transvestite, she asserts her presence verbally, contesting the transformative nature of clothing even as she revels in the freedom it affords her.

The usurpers exercise even greater freedom without the protective benefit of male clothing, and their mannish behavior is perceived as a dangerous transgression of gender roles that the male characters in the play deplore. They commit ruthless deeds and are condemned not because they are cruel, but because they are women. Consider York’s invective against Queen Margaret in the third part of *Henry VI*: “How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex / To triumph, like an Amazonian trull, / Upon their woes whom fortune captivates!” (1.4.113-15) He does not necessarily fault her for being victorious, nor for gloating; instead he chastises her for doing these things as a woman: “how ill-becoming is it in thy sex.” These actions are not womanly, and he continues to enumerate what women are, and what she, by contrast, is not:

- O tiger’s heart wrapt in a woman’s hide!
- How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child,
- To bid the father wipe his eyes withal,
- And yet be seen to bear a woman’s face?
Women are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible;
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless. (1.4.137-42)

York is, in a sense, “unsexing” Queen Margaret. She bears a woman’s face, seems to be a woman, but her conduct and character traits belie her appearance. She is not, according to the definition established by York, a woman, but since she looks and dresses like a woman, she cannot be a man either. She has the visual markers of a woman, but not the essential qualities. She is simultaneously neither sex and both, a behavioral transvestite. Taking advantage of this topsy-turvy world of gender instability, York too transgresses. He, however, masculinizes his weeping, first comparing his grief to a storm, and then equating his tears for his son with a desire for revenge: “For raging wind blows up incessant showers, / And when the rage allays, the rain begins. / These tears are my sweet Rutland’s obsequies: / And every drop cries vengeance for his death...” (1.4.145-48). His moment of weakness is excusable because it is linked to a strongly masculine desire for violence and dominion.

Queen Margaret has disrupted the rules of identity by dressing like a woman and having a woman’s face, yet behaving like a man. Her conspirators are largely spared York’s rage. He accuses them of cowardice, in what appears to be a last hurrah of bravado, but his venom is all for Margaret. It would seem that her violation of the guiding principles of womanhood is more disturbing and egregious than defeat on a field of battle and the loss of a kingdom. There is, perhaps, a sense that if a woman is so out of her place, nothing can then be right, and it is this misalignment of the entire universe that angers and torments York. Margaret, to him, is both cause and sign of a perverse imbalance; she was not only a driving force behind the war, but she
also participates in it. One of York’s foes, Northumberland, is ultimately moved to tears by his speech, claiming that “Had he been slaughter-man to all my kin, / I should not for my life but weep with him. / To see how inly sorrow grieves his soul” (1.4.169-71). As one might expect in this world of disordered genders, it is Queen Margaret who taunts him for his tears: “What, weeping-ripe, my Lord Northumberland? / Think but upon the wrong he did us all, / And that will quickly dry thy melting tears” (1.4.172-74). He makes no response, but tellingly, the stage directions call for York to be stabbed one line later by Clifford, and then by Queen Margaret. Northumberland does not appear to strike a blow.

There are some key womanly traits that do not make York’s list, but are implied elsewhere in the text. York has established Queen Margaret as unnatural and unwomanly by the time she scolds Northumberland, so when she reminds him of the wrongs York did them all, it is inferred that her eagerness for revenge contrasts with the more appropriate feminine quality of patient forbearance. By denigrating Margaret for taking action, leading an army, remembering wrongs, York is reminding the audience that a woman should be just the opposite: passive, biddable, and forgiving.

Although the displacement of the normal and stable is at the heart of drama, plays in which women upset the balance often seem particularly unsettled, from the tiger’s heart of Queen Margaret to the unsexed Lady Macbeth. The infamous Scotswoman is every bit as ambitious as her husband, and initially, more resolute. It is she who remorselessly offers the singular image of a mother dashing out the brains of her own nursing infant⁹, she who tells Macbeth to “screw [his]

⁹ In Act 1, scene 7, Lady Macbeth, encouraging her husband to honor his promise to kill Duncan, declares: “I would, while it [her baby] was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out...” (1.7.44-46).
courage to the sticking-place,” she whose only impediment to murder is a sentimental soft spot for her father (1.7.60). The world she helps to create through regicide is one that becomes almost instantly and tangibly unnatural”: an old man reports to Ross that after Duncan was killed, “On Tuesday last, / A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawk’d at and kill’d” (2.4.11-13). Ross responds with a story of horses that “Turn’d wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out, / Contending ‘gainst obedience, as they would make / War with mankind,” and confirms as true what the old man has heard—that the horses ate each other (2.4.16-18).

While the men link these unusual goings-on to the death of their king, making no mention of the unwomanly behavior of their new queen, their omission comes only from ignorance. The audience, well aware of Lady Macbeth’s role in the murder, can quickly and easily discern the extent of the havoc an unsexed” woman can wreak. Lady Macbeth is both divested of sex—sexless, neither man nor woman—and deprived of the typical qualities of the female, which in the dichotomy of gendered opposites, makes her a man. The issue is further complicated when Macbeth exhorts her to Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males” (1.7.72-74). If she can bring forth children, she must be a woman, but she possesses characteristics that should construct only men. The text seems to establish her as an asexual hermaphrodite (i.e., both sexes and neither at the same time), reinforced by the fact that on stage, she was being portrayed by an adolescent boy—someone who is neither a woman nor fully a man, yet performs as the first until he becomes the second.

Macbeth himself displays similar gender uncertainty. He is first described by a messenger
from the battlefield as “brave” in his pursuit of the traitorous Macdonwald: “Disdaining fortune, with his brandish’d steel, / Which smoked with bloody execution, / … he unseam’d him from the nave to the chaps, / And fix’d his head upon our battlements” (1.2.17-18, 22-23). Here Macbeth is all strength and valor, decisive and ruthless; what better proof of masculinity than a military victory? Yet two short scenes later, his wife delivers a fretful soliloquy, bemoaning his nature, which she claims is too full of “the milk of human kindness” and serves to stifle his ambition (1.5.15). She continues, “Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee…” (1.5.23-26). Even before she asks to be unsexed, she clearly views herself as the stronger and more determined of the pair.

There seems to be a division of manly traits: Macbeth possesses the physical prowess, and Lady Macbeth has the emotional fortitude. It is her “spirits that she wants to share with her husband, and she charges him with being “infirm of purpose” when he wavers midway through their plot (2.2.50). The changes she desires to accompany her unsexing are largely physical, as she asks to be full “Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood; / Stop up the access and passage to remorse, … / Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers...” (1.5.41-42, 45-46). If the Macbeths’ world is dysfunctional and uncertain, the blame in no small part could be traced to the couple’s gender confusion. If there is no clear man and no clear woman, the witches are right, and “fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.10).

The lines of gender distinction are similarly blurred by Antony and Cleopatra, who seem unable to establish their roles within the relationship, with disastrous results. The confusion is stated in the opening lines of the play, in which a disgusted attendant remarks on Antony’s
transformation from a man with eyes that have glowed like Mars and a “captain’s heart, / Which
in the scuffles of great fights hath burst / The buckles on his breast” into a “strumpet’s fool” who
“is become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gipsy’s lust” (1.1.6-8, 13, 9). Cleopatra, it seems,
has unsexed Antony, taken away the military ferocity that distinguished him as a man, and turned
him into not just a lover, but a subservient one at that. Cleopatra is the one who actively lusts,
and it is merely Antony’s task to satisfy her.

Cleopatra is unique amongst the usurpers, for rather than emasculating the men around
her by assuming their qualities, she exerts the full strength of her own sexuality to overwhelm
them and render them powerless. She exhibits many of the characteristics that are usually labeled
feminine—she is jealous, temperamental, and needy—but she crafts them to her decided
advantage. For example, her insistence that Antony hear the messengers from Rome in the first
scene appears to indicate that she is more interested in matters of state than he is: he asks for “the
sum,” and she insists that he “hear them,” saying, “Fulvia perchance is angry; or, who knows / If
the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent / His powerful mandate to you, ‘Do this, or this; / Take
in that kingdom, and enfranchise that...’” (1.1.18-23). Although the bulk of her reasoning focuses
on Caesar, as does her subsequent exhortation, she also mentions Fulvia, Antony’s wife, each
time, and it seems that her real goal for the exchange has remained the same from the time she
walked on stage and spoke her first line: “If it be love indeed, tell me how much” (1.1.14). It is
not Caesar she cares about. She wants to hear that Fulvia is no threat and that Antony remains
hers. To outsmart Antony, Cleopatra just has to be more woman than Antony is man.

Antony himself observes, upon hearing the false report of Cleopatra’s death (a message
delivered to him on her order so that he will realize how much he loves her), “I...condemn myself to lack / The courage of a woman” (4.14.57, 59-60).10 Earlier in the scene, he claims that Cleopatra “has robb’d me of my sword” (4.14.23). He is speaking as a soldier who has been defeated and must surrender his sword to the conquerer, but the sexual implication is obvious. By following Cleopatra’s desires, by making “these wars for Egypt,” by letting himself be controlled by a woman, he has lost every vestige of manhood, from the implement to the organ (4.14.15).11

Phyllis Rackin notes that Cleopatra embodied many of the anti-theatrical writers’ complaints about the stage in general. Antony’s time spent with her “is wasted in idleness and debauchery, which compromise his manhood,” and she is “deceptive and immoral” (Rackin 86). Hours squandered in the playhouse, watching a catalog of a whore’s conquests, would do no one any good. Cleopatra demonstrates the disastrous consequences that come from an unnatural woman who overpowers a man, corrupting him and upsetting the social order.

If Queen Margaret is the wrong sex, and Lady Macbeth no sex at all, then Cleopatra is too much sex. As evidenced by the many dispersions cast upon her character by nearly everyone in the play, her superfluity of sex appeal results in a virtual negation of gender. All three characters exist in a limbo-like “no-woman’s land”; although its inhabitants have been painstakingly made to look like women through costuming, the illusion is undone by the text. In Cleopatra’s case, the word “whore” functions to indicate that the person under discussion is not a

---

10 However, in the final scene, when Cleopatra does indeed kill herself, she, like Lady Macbeth, speaks of shedding her womanly traits, indicating that an absence of any sex at all (male or female) is ideal for murder of any kind; killing could be considered such an inhuman act that everyone must be unsexed in order to carry it out: “My resolution’s plac’d, and I have nothing / Of woman in me now: from head to foot / I am marble-constant...” (5.2.290-2).

11 Cleopatra has, at least on one occasion, literally robbed a man of his sword. While waiting for news from Rome, she briefly recounts an incident in which she and a partner cross-dressed in his bed: “Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippan” (2.5.28-29).
good woman, and is therefore not a woman at all. Her own failings are so powerful that they threaten to strip the men around her of their masculinity—actions here align with Stubbes’ concerns that transgressive clothing threatens both sexes even if only one of them errs. If gender is constructed in opposition, a man needs to be contrasted with the dependably archetypal female in order for both roles to be understood. A whorish woman undermines the credibility of herself, her man, and the entire system.

This is true of the usurping Cleopatra and all of Shakespeare’s good women,” each of whom is accused and labeled “whore” by an outside observer and is judged by the resulting negative images of herself. Desdemona, Hero, and Innogen are decried as false—in the sense of being unfaithful to their men and in the sense of not really being women at all because of this infidelity. Like the usurpers, these good women are compared to the sexual ideal and found lacking. But while Queen Margaret, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra actively performed the transgressive acts they were accused of and could be evaluated by the evidence of their misdeeds, the good women are innocent and thereby compared to imaginary versions of themselves. As with the invisible transvestite, an unseen character haunts the stage, but this time, instead of disappearing, the phantom covers the women with text so damning that key characters fail to perceive the deception.

The dichotomy is established explicitly between “woman” and “whore” when Othello accuses a bewildered Desdemona of being “...that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello” (4.2.90-91). He has demanded that she define herself, asking, “Why, what art thou?” She responds by placing herself firmly in the category of woman: “Your wife, my lord; your true
and loyal wife” (4.2.33, 34). It is impossible to be both “true and loyal wife” and whore, a point Desdemona reinforces when she refuses to admit that a whore is a woman at all, asking, “Am I that name, Iago?” (4.2.117) A whore is not a woman or even a person; it is a name, a word that, according to Othello, can be written on “fair paper” and mar it so completely that no trace of “woman” remains (4.2.71).

When Desdemona later discusses the question of infidelity with Emilia, she is unable to believe that this manner of betrayal is possible: “I do not think there is any such woman” (4.3.85). Her assessment is correct. Women (like Desdemona) are not unfaithful to their husbands; only whores (like the imaginary Desdemona) have that ignominious distinction. Of course, she is also accurate within the boundaries of the play—there is no such woman, no unfaithful Desdemona, but what is not there so powerfully obscures what is that, inevitably, “chaos is come again” (3.3.93).

These invisible forces assert themselves linguistically, not only through the words that are spoken, but also through the act of being spoken. Just as the performative abilities of clothing were used to establish identity, the text within the world of the play frequently operates as a speech act: “to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something, and even by saying something we do something” (Austin 94). Speaking the word “whore” does all of these things; pronouncing it makes it so. This may be why Desdemona can barely pronounce the word, protesting,

I cannot say ‘whore’:

It does abhor me now I speak the word;
To do the act that might the addition earn

Not the world’s mass of vanity could make me. (4.2.161-164)

Saying the word is so close to doing the act that it is difficult for her, in her purity, to even speak the word. The word itself is spoken eight times in the second scene of Act 4, and it is used one additional time as a verb by Emilia: “My lord [Othello] hath so bewhored her” (4.2.115). By calling Desdemona “whore,” Othello has made her one, because “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin 6).

Once declared a whore, whether she is or not, the woman cannot reemerge until the whore has been killed, either in actuality (Desdemona) or in belief (Hero and Innogen). Othello in effect admits this in his monologue that opens the bloody final scene, saying, “Put out the light, and then put out the light: / If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, / I can again thy former light restore” (5.2.7-9). In death, the whore Desdemona vanishes, replaced by the untainted woman Desdemona, once again pure and virginal, cleansed by the baptism of death. Indeed, it is only after she is dead that Othello finally begins to believe the protestations of her innocence; Emilia, whose testimony he previously ignored, is now a trustworthy witness. Othello, however, never truly repents his murder. He begs Cassio’s pardon for planning his death, calls himself a fool, admits that he “threw a pearl away,” but claims to be “an honourable murderer, if you will; / For nought I did in hate, but all in honour,” and asks to be remembered as “one that loved not wisely but too well” (5.2. 293-94, 343). Even though the accusation of Desdemona’s whoredom was false, he clearly still regards his reaction to the news as sound. Operating under the belief that his wife was adulterous, his only recourse was murder; her death alone could restore honor
to them both by ridding him of a whore and transforming her into a perfect, unblemished, angelic woman.

The theory that a dead good woman is better than a live whore is also subscribed to by Posthumus in *Cymbeline* and Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Fortunately for Innogen and Hero, though, fake death is enough to satisfy their gullible lovers and restore them to honor. Like Desdemona, they too must face reversed images of themselves, in which actions and honor are questioned, accusations leveled with little to no tangible proof, and their own avowals of honesty disregarded. *Cymbeline*, one of Shakespeare’s late romances, is a play with a little bit of everything—lost siblings, warring kings, a plotting step-mother, an abhorred suitor, disguises, separated lovers, jealousy, and deception (not to mention a visit from the gods and a cross-dressed heroine). In one of the plot strands, Posthumus has been banished from Cymbeline’s court as punishment for marrying the king’s daughter, Innogen, without permission. He flees to Rome and rekindles an argument with an old acquaintance, wherein a man’s honor is measured by the purity and beauty of his woman. Iachimo proposes a wager, which Posthumus rashly accepts: Iachimo will test Innogen’s virtue by trying to seduce her. Although Posthumus’s initial faith in Innogen’s virtue may be admirable, his later willingness to trust the word of a man who only stands to gain by claiming triumph over chastity is less laudable.

Predictably, Iachimo obtains his proof by elaborate subterfuge. He asks Innogen to store a trunk of valuables in her bedchamber to keep it safe, and then hides inside it and climbs out to survey her sleeping body. The invader studies every detail of the chamber and its occupant, delivering an elaborate monologue in which he compares himself to the rapist Tarquin and
praises Innogen’s appearance with ardent fervor. He notes a mole on her left breast and slips from her wrist the bracelet Posthumus had given her; these are the details that convince Posthumus of Innogen’s guilt. Just as Othello’s naming of Desdemona as “whore” made her one, so does Iachimo violate Innogen by describing what he would like to do: “That I might touch! / But kiss; one kiss! Rubies unparagon’d, / How dearly they do’t!” (2.2.20-22) This line of thinking is almost too much for him. He scolds himself and stops taking notes: “No more. To what end? / Why should I write this down, that’s riveted, / Screw’d to my memory?” (2.2.44-48) The deed done, he creeps back into the trunk to wait for morning.

Iachimo’s words have performed their duty; he has in effect raped Innogen linguistically, and she will remain unable to disprove him until the final scene when he admits his deceit, again engaging in a speech act—by pronouncing Innogen guilty, she is guilty, and by declaring her innocent, her virginity is restored. This retraction cannot happen, of course, until after the “whore Innogen” has died so that the good woman can replace her. Again, as in the case of Othello, the supposedly wronged husband is the only one who believes the speaker and gives the speech act its power. Those around her, such as the servant Pisanio, who has been left behind by Posthumus to be Innogen’s protector in his absence, give the story no credence. The unhappy task of disposing of the sullied Innogen falls to Pisanio, and he does indeed do away with Innogen by disguising her as a boy until the false truth established by Iachimo can be undone and the true truth revealed.

In an inversion of Othello’s comparison of Desdemona to “fair paper,” Pisanio faults the letter Posthumus has sent to Innogen along with his murderous instructions to Pisanio:
...O damn’d paper!

Black as the ink that’s on thee! Senseless bauble,

Art thou a feodary for this act, and look’st

So virgin-like without? (3.2.21-24)

The paper appears virgin-like, as does Innogen, but while the “senseless bauble” is stained black not only by the ink inscribed onto it but also by the meaning of the words themselves, Innogen remains unmarred and unwritten. In both instances, the purity of the woman is symbolized by a blank sheet of paper; the words that are enacted upon her—notably, not by the woman herself—determine what and who she is: woman or whore, dead or alive, a credit to her husband or a disgrace.

The paper that “strumpet” is written on, the letter Posthumus writes to Pisanio instructing him to kill Innogen, begins the process of killing the supposed whore. After Innogen has read the accusations, Pisanio observes, “What shall I need to draw my sword? the paper / Hath cut her throat already. No, ’tis slander, / Whose edge is sharper than the sword” (3.4.25-27). While the paper has delivered the message, the pronouncement of her infidelity has provided the fatal blow. Innogen, though she surmises Posthumus is looking for a way to get rid of her because he has taken up with “some jay of Italy,” recognizes that, thus accused, her only option is death. Her tirade against Posthumus (and men in general) alternates with pleas to Pisanio to do as his master ordered and kill her. “I draw the sword myself: take it, and hit / The innocent mansion of my love, my heart,” she says, and when Pisanio refuses the sword, persists, “Why, I must die...The lamb entreats the butcher: where’s thy knife? / Thou art too slow to do thy master’s bidding, /
When I desire it too” (3.4.61-62, 70, 93-95).

There is, it must be noted, a bit of Cleopatra-like hysteria here. As the Egyptian queen prematurely sent Antony word of her death in order to arouse guilt and love, so Innogen declares tempestuously that Posthumus will miss her when she’s gone. Referring to her willingness to disobey her father and her possession of the spirit and courage to marry Posthumus against the king’s wishes, she remarks that Posthumus “shalt hereafter find / It is no act of common passage, but / A strain of rareness” (3.4.87-89). Without knowing the necessity of it, Innogen is protesting her innocence and her faithfulness, establishing herself as a good woman.

A clear understanding of the dichotomy between “whore” and “wife” hovers within these forgivable histrionics. Innogen knows that she cannot live as a wronged wife—there is no place for her within society as either an adulterous wife or one who has been deserted by her husband. The only way to restore herself is to die. Pisanio, however, has an alternative route to rebirth. He proposes disguise and a journey to Italy, essentially to spy on Posthumus and uncover the truth behind his accusations. She initially resists Pisanio’s suggestion of a fake death and a life in hiding, noting that a woman cannot live if unrecognized by her husband by arguing, “how live? / Or in my life what comfort, when I am / Dead to my husband?” (3.4.135-137) The question is both philosophical and practical. Symbolically, as it takes a husband to make a woman a wife, he is also necessary to keep her alive. Practically, if she refuses to go back to her father’s court lest

12 Innogen’s reaction to the news of her impending death differs starkly from Desdemona’s fierce resistance. While Desdemona begs for banishment or at the very least a stay of execution for one night, Innogen draws the dagger and pleads to be dispatched. It may be that Othello is a much more menacing figure than the servant Pisanio—Innogen must know that meek and loyal Pisanio has no intention of following through, which makes her entreaties entirely safe, whereas Othello, looming up out of the dark, after having becoming increasingly erratic throughout the course of the play, asking if prayers have been said and sins confessed, presents a convincing figure of the executioner.
she be forced to marry the odious Cloten, and if she does not have a husband’s protection, she
has no place to live and is homeless, without any of the material comforts usually afforded a
princess.

Despite her protestations, Pisanio convinces Innogen to cling to life a little longer and
adopt the guise of a page. While trusting the clothes he has brought to establish her identity as a
male, Pisanio also helpfully tells Innogen how to act like a man:

You must forget to be a woman; change

Command into obedience: fear and niceness—
The handmaids of all women, or, more truly,

Woman its pretty self—into a waggish courage:

Ready in gibes, quick-answer’d, saucy and

As quarrelous as the weasel... (3.4.167-172)

His very first phrase—“You must forget to be a woman”—is a reminder of the constant
performance required to communicate sexuality. It may also be a sly reminder to the boy actor,
though both he and “real” women were constantly reminded, by the clothes they wore and the
society they lived in, that they were indeed women. It may seem odd that Pisanio classifies
“command” as a feminine trait that must be changed into obedience, but this clearly indicates a
characteristic specific to Innogen, a princess who must be accustomed to giving orders and
seeing them followed. But he returns to generalities when he claims that “fear and niceness” are
“women its pretty self.” Like sexualized clothing, personality traits and the actions resulting
from them are so closely aligned with a sex that they are that sex—a man could not exhibit fear
and niceness, because he would not then be a man at all; any person exhibiting such behaviors would be a woman.

Pisanio paints a picture of the sexes that is a study of opposites, perhaps purposefully exaggerated to demonstrate the apparently random method of assigning emotions based on biology. Neither men nor women come off particularly well. Women are bossy, and fearful. Whatever courage men possess is waggish, or mischievous, and they are saucy and quarrelsome; little wonder that Innogen’s first words in disguise are “I see a man’s life is a tedious one” (3.6.1). The man that Innogen becomes, however, does not fit Pisanio’s description. She adopts the symbolic name of Fidele and wins the heart and trust of everyone she meets, from her long-lost brothers to the captain of the invading army. Like all supposed-adulteresses, she must die in some way before her honor can be restored, and since Cymbeline is one of Shakespeare’s more extravagant plays, poor Innogen dies twice. The first death is caused by a potion given to Pisanio by the queen (who had in fact hoped to really kill Innogen), which is actually a drug substituted by the court physician that, as he explains in the elaborate denouement, “would cease / The present power of life, but in short time / All offices of nature should again / Do their due functions” (5.5.299-302). The result does convince her new companions that she is dead, resulting in her separation from them and her discovery of the beheaded body she mistakes for Posthumus. While she thinks he is dead and joins the service of the Romans, Posthumus has in turn received a bloody rag from Pisanio as proof of Innogen’s death.

Death has not yet cleansed Innogen, though. While Posthumus bewails the murderous deed, he continues to believe his reasoning sound; addressing married men, he reflects that “If
each of you should take this course, how many / Must murder wives much better than themselves
/ For wrying but a little!” (5.1.5-7) Innogen, and countless other women, remain accused of
“wrying,” which the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “to deviate or
swerve from the right or proper course; to go wrong, to err.” The word does not seem to have an
explicit sexual connotation, which demonstrates the depth of this particular married one’s
remorse. Innogen’s infidelity, once great enough to deserve no punishment less than death, is
now just an error. His reaction is in line with Innogen’s desires: his memory is indeed “pang’d”
by her (3.4.92).

Since she died in stages, so is she revived. In a final scene packed with discoveries,
revelations, and reunions, Innogen, as Fidele, is taken prisoner with her Roman master. The
friends she made in Wales (the ones who killed Cloten and turn out to be her brothers) thought
her dead and are puzzled by her reappearance, wondering if this is “The same dead thing alive,”
but noting, “Creatures may be alike: were ‘t he, I am sure / He would have spoke to us” (5.5.148,
150-151). It falls to Pisanio to reassure the audience in an aside, while Innogen is speaking
privately with her father, who has not recognized her, that “It is my mistress” (5.5.154).
Posthumus too thoroughly fails to see through her disguise and strikes her to the ground when
she tries to tell him that she is alive. Iachimo has, by this time, revealed his deception, and
Posthumus directs most of his rage at himself, admitting that he was a “credulous fool” to have
believed Iachimo’s accusations and that it was he who set Iachimo to the task that led to
Innogen’s death (5.4.210).

There are only two significant women’s roles in Cymbeline: Innogen and her step-mother,
known only as the queen. While this discussion has been primarily concerned with the
disparagement of a good woman when contrasted with a whore version of herself, the queen
reverses this process by presenting to the court the picture of a devoted wife and mother while
secretly plotting to take over the kingdom for herself and her son Cloten. Her deception is not
entirely successful, as Innogen expresses dislike for her, and in this final scene, the court
physician, Cornelius, admits that he never trusted her and made certain that she never had
harmful poisons within reach as she desired. Cornelius relates her deathbed confession of all her
evil intentions, and Cymbeline, shocked by the news, muses on the undecidability of woman:

Mine eyes

Were not in fault, for she was beautiful,

Mine ears, that heard her flattery, nor my heart

That thought her like her seeming. It had been vicious

To have mistrusted her... (5.4.62-66)

Othello and Posthumus could attest to the viciousness of such distrust, but more tellingly, the
situation demonstrates how insecure appearances were. Although a woman could be identified
as such by her clothing, her own features and actions were almost impossible to decipher.
Innogen, who behaves chastely throughout, is immediately believed a whore, and the queen, all
smiles to the king, is proved false only because she is dead. Cymbeline admits that if the queen
had not spoken these words as she died, he would not have given them credit. The formula of
truth in death works both ways: the whore must die to be replaced by the good woman, and so

13 Such mistakes bring to mind lines from *Venus and Adonis*, when Venus in effect places a curse on love after her
own affair ends unhappily and Adonis is killed hunting a wild boar: “It shall suspect where is no cause of fear; /
It shall not fear where it should most mistrust.” Perhaps it is not just woman who is undecidable, but love.
must the loving wife die to be replaced by the traitorous schemer.

Innogen is finally allowed her complete resurrection after one more brief death suffered when Posthumus knocks her down, thinking her a meddlesome boy. Pisanio comes to her rescue again, informing Posthumus that “You ne’er kill’d Innogen til now” (5.5.268). Her identity has been reestablished in two ways—first, she becomes a woman again by Iachimo’s admission of his own perfidy that exonerates her from whoredom, and then she becomes a living woman when her page’s disguise is undone by Pisanio. Iachimo relates the story of Innogen’s slander in laborious detail. His testimony leaves no doubt about her chastity, a necessary identifying trait that cannot be demonstrated by clothing and is instead secured through inaction. While Pisanio is able to transform Fidele into Innogen, only Iachimo and his avowal of her purity, can replace the whore with the good woman.14

A meek and understanding wife is likewise Claudio’s reward for being a penitent (and inadvertent) “murderer” in Much Ado About Nothing. After publicly shaming Hero on what was to be their wedding day because he believes he has seen her consort with another man, Claudio shows little regret for his decision to repudiate her, even after her death has been reported to him, until she has been revealed as falsely accused. He is more upset by being called a liar by Hero’s father than he is by news of her death. When he and Don Pedro meet Benedick moments after they are told she is dead, he enjoins Benedick to cheer him up: “we are / high-proof melancholy and would fain have it beaten / away. Wilt thou use thy wit?” (5.1.131-132). He is eager to

14 Innogen immediately exhibits the forgiving spirit so necessary in a good woman by refraining from scolding or reproaching Posthumus; she may be remembering her own doubt of Posthumus’s constancy, which neither she nor Pisanio ever reveals, but it is likely that any guilt she might feel is eased by the knowledge that she, at least, never tried to kill him.
recover quickly from the death of one he swore to love dearly. But he has also stated that the Hero he loved never existed: “Hero itself can blot out Hero’s virtue,” he declares (4.1.97). Like the “fair paper” that was Desdemona, Hero has been marred by her imagined misdeeds.

Claudio makes a clear distinction between the woman Hero and the whore Hero, the former now blotted out by the latter. Both cannot exist simultaneously. What’s left is an empty representation of what he thought had been there, like a dress on a hanger. “She’s but the sign and semblance of her honour... / Would you not swear, / All you that see her, that she were a maid, / By these exterior shows? But she is none” (4.1.26, 31-33). Claudio echoes Cymbeline’s despairing assessment of the unreliability of appearance, crying, “Seeming! I will write against it: / You seem to me as Dian in her orb, / As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown” (4.1.50-52). A key difference between Claudio and his gullible fellows is, of course, that he believes he has seen Hero in the act of betrayal. He says he will withhold judgement until the thing has been proved, and when he believes that it has, he unleashes a cold-hearted fury. Just as Hero on her wedding day is, according to Claudio, “a sign and semblance,” so was she signified by her clothing the night before. When Borachio explains the deception, he recounts how Don Pedro and Claudio witnessed him “court Margaret in Hero’s garments” (5.1.171). Once again, what appeared to be true is not, and as easily as clothing constructs a character, so too can it undo character.

The whore Hero has been, as it were, undressed, and Claudio is free to mourn: “Sweet Hero! now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first” (5.1.178-179). No longer blotted out, the woman Hero is once again visible and uncorrupted. The friar, who proposed Hero’s fake death, seems to be of the same opinion as Cleopatra and Innogen regarding
remorseful lovers, for his plan is grounded in the assumption that absence makes the heart grow fonder: “That what we have we prize not to the worth” (4.1.222). The friar has miscalculated. Claudio values Hero not after he has lost her, but after her innocence has been established incontrovertibly. It is not just lacking Hero that causes Claudio’s regret, but the knowledge that he lacks Hero the woman. Hero herself recognizes the split; at the wedding ceremony, after she is unmasked and revealed to be alive, she points out, “One Hero died defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid” (5.4.70-71). Indeed, it is only because she is a maid that she can live, a fact that Leonato also knows: “She died, my lord, but whiles her slander liv’d” (5.4.73). Slander (and whore) removed, Hero the good woman is restored.

Transgressions need not always be as extreme as murder or whoredom to arouse alarm. Apparently mild social misconduct also contested the limits of female behavior by constructing characters who were almost entirely recognizable as women but voiced a desire to control their own lives rather than remaining subordinate and obedient to the men around them. In Much Ado About Nothing, Hero is contrasted with her spirited and witty cousin Beatrice, who behaves like a good woman but doesn’t quite talk like one; here, the character’s own language establishes her place within the social structure and her willingness to rebel against it.

Beatrice’s situation is discussed almost as frequently as Hero’s. She is, according to Benedick, very beautiful, exceeding Hero “as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” (1.1.186-87). She clearly demonstrates her quick wit, bewildering the messenger who brings word of the triumph and arrival of Don Pedro and his men, and getting the best of Benedick on multiple occasions. But it is her marriage prospects that are of primary concern.
Leonato scolds her, “By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue,” and Antonio tells her she’s “curst,” an epithet also given to Kate in _Taming of the Shrew_ (2.1.17-18, 19).

Despite her failure to fit neatly within the mold of a passive good woman, Beatrice is not punished for her transgressions. She teases and spars, and even advises Hero to keep the option of marrying against her father’s wishes: “let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please me’” (2.1.53-55). Yet she never suffers slander or disdain, and the trick the others play upon her and Benedick results in a wedding. Although she is spared the public humiliation that befalls the wronged good woman and another “curst” heroine (Kate the shrew), she is all too aware of the limitations that accompany her status. Exhorting Benedick to defend her cousin’s honor, knowing that only a man can exact revenge on Claudio, she repeats her desire to be a man more than once, and ends by emphasizing, “O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place” (4.1.306-7). She bitterly admits that she is trapped: “I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving” (4.1.322-23). Beatrice has managed to exert some control over her marital status, but she cannot defy convention so completely by challenging Claudio (although she does convince Benedick to do it on her behalf by appealing to his love for her). She combines her transgressive boldness with the tradition of a fair maiden choosing a champion to fight for her family’s honor, thus preserving her womanliness while satisfying her desire for revenge.

Beatrice is unique among the women discussed here. She does not dress as a man, but she still speaks her mind. She elicits a promise of murder from a man, but he does not need to do the
deed. She marries a man who might be considered her equal, but he does not tame her. In no way is Beatrice punished for her transgressions. Hero, the model good woman, suffers the most. Together, they seem to present two prototypes of womanhood that complicate expectations, but it can also be said that Beatrice’s real transgressions are of lesser importance than Hero’s imagined deception. Beatrice’s words might indicate high spirits and quick wit, but her actions are always within the bounds of propriety. Hero, though blameless, is believed to have committed the unforgivable sin of losing her virginity before she is married, and to a man who is not her betrothed. Although Beatrice might compare unfavorably to the real Hero, her chastity places her high above the imagined whore Hero. Unlike the usurpers, Beatrice never crosses the boundaries of sex, and so despite her verbal fireworks, she remains recognizably female.

In *Taming of the Shrew*, Kate suffers mightily for her unwomanly ways as she attempts to exist outside of the framework of “woman” by forgoing marriage and refusing the title of “wife.” Society, however, provides few alternatives. The methodology of definition by contrast is much stronger in this play, which establishes the differences between the ideal woman and the deviant in cruel detail. The combative sisters Kate and Bianca share none of the affection demonstrated by cousins Beatrice and Hero. These two are immediately cast as shrew and angel. Tranio comments that Kate is either “mad or wonderful froward,” and Lucentio hastily quiets him: “But in the other’s silence do I see / Maid’s mild behavior and sobriety” (1.1. 69, 70-71). Again, the woman who does not fit the definition of “woman” is unsexed, for if Bianca exhibits “maid’s mild behavior,” and Kate does not, she cannot be a maid.

The necessity of such a complete transformation reminds the audience that if a woman is
not aligning herself within the defined boundaries of womanhood, she does not exist at all. Paula Backscheider, writing about the eighteenth-century English novel, makes an observation that was no less true two centuries earlier, “Like a vessel into which any fantasy can be poured, a screen on which any image can be projected...available as fetish, trope, trophy, and symbol, woman can stand for whatever is needed” (7). On the Elizabethan stage, the vessel itself (a male player) must first be made into a woman and then filled with the appropriate signs of womanhood. The double enforcement is required to banish the two invisible others haunting the stage: that of the transvestite male actor and that of the woman character who is not acting like a woman.

Language and action here supplement clothing to establish identity; both the male actor and the female character must possess all the traits of a woman, from the dress to the demeanor.

For Kate, the dichotomy between a truly recognizable woman and her sexless self is ever-present in the form of Bianca, who, with her mild ways, is the epitome of womanhood, has numerous suitors pursuing her, and is a valued prize to be bestowed only after her older sister has been disposed of. Kate recognizes, however, that even a real woman is incomplete unless she has a husband, reminding her father, “She [Bianca] is your treasure, she must have a husband; / I must dance bare-foot on her wedding day / And for your love to her lead apes in hell” (2.1.32-34). The ultimate proof of womanhood is to become a wife, and as long as Kate resists that fate, she is nothing—not a woman and not even a daughter.

Kate’s most egregious crime is really one of performance. She refuses to behave like a woman, and because she does not act like one, she is not one. Bianca, though praised for her silence and meek manners, betrays a headstrong streak that is no less stubborn than her sister’s,
just more artfully performed. She tells her bickering tutors (suitors in disguise):

    Why, gentlemen, you do me double wrong,
    To strive for that which resteth in my choice:
    I am no breeching scholar in the schools;
    I’ll not be tied to hours nor ’pointed times,
    But learn my lessons as I please myself. (3.1.16-20)

Imagine the lines purred by Marilyn Monroe, and then spat out by Bette Davis. The message is not the problem—the men do not mind that Bianca is in control of the situation, the one who, according to Kate in the final scene, seeks “rule, supremacy and sway” (5.2.163). Bianca, after all, is the sister who runs away and gets married without her father’s permission, while Kate submits and weds a man who she has met once and who appears quite mad, because her father has told her to. Bianca, because she observes the rules of performance and acts the way a woman should, even when behaving just as obstinately as a shrew, is not condemned (until the end of the play, when her recalcitrance loses her new husband his wager).

Petruchio’s subsequent “taming” technique can be seen as a Pygmalion-like process of education and creation. His actions elicit the reactions and emotions that any woman would be expected to feel: frustration at missing a wedding feast, patience with petulant and erratic behavior, desire for pretty clothes, and, of course, willingness to please her husband. Most importantly, he teaches her the acceptable way to express or suppress these feelings. As she becomes a woman, she also becomes human, which her father alludes to when she exits weeping because Petruchio is late to their wedding (the ability to endure humiliation being another
necessary trait): “For such an injury would vex a very saint, / Much more a shrew of thy impatient humour” (3.2.28-29). It is not, perhaps, the kindest consolation a father could offer, but it is the first time any sort of allowance for her attitude has been made. Unbeknownst to both of them, Kate’s transformation has begun; now that she reacts the way a woman would under such circumstances, although still a shrew, she is worthy of more pity than scorn. The transformation is completed by the close of the play, when Kate startles everyone by demonstrating obedience. Like the good woman who can live again once the whore is dead, the new version of Kate is recognized as something entirely new, as her father promises Petruchio “Another dowry to another daughter, / For she is changed, as she had never been” (5.2.114-15). She has learned her lessons so well that she has outshone the ideal Bianca and become the new model for a good woman, a fact she demonstrates not only by coming when her husband calls, but also by providing a list of rules that all women should follow, the primary components being “love, fair looks and true obedience” (5.2.153). She outlines the hierarchy of man as ruler and woman as subject that she had spent so much time and energy contesting.

Critics have argued about the delivery of Kate’s instructions to women. Is she ironic, has she got the better of Petruchio after all, or is she well and truly tamed, humiliated, put in her place and stripped of all dignity? Both sides make convincing arguments, and it is perhaps a case better illustrated than discussed. I saw a 2003 Royal Shakespeare Company production in which Kate and Petruchio were presented in a more Beatrice and Benedick fashion, as in their first encounter, they seem to be testing each other, cautiously enthusiastic about potentially finding their match (in both the sense of a worthy adversary and a mate for life); Miriam Gilbert
compares them to “children resting from play” (330). G.B. Shand describes a production with an all-female cast at Shakespeare’s Globe that “[transformed] Katherina into a kind of over-the-top domestic monster of Petruchio’s own inadvertent making...[who initiates] Bianca and the Widow into a complicit resistant sisterhood” (557). What is most significant for this discussion, however, is the presence of the speech at all. Although Shakespeare’s women are shown acting appropriately or not, very rarely do they run through a long list of rules they know they should follow. When they do acknowledge guidelines, often it is because the women are about to flout them, such as when the cross-dressers point out that they’re not supposed to wear male clothing, and then do just that.

Kate, however, enumerates the rules she has already broken. As other female characters have shown, knowing the rules does not mean they won’t be violated. In fact, an intimate familiarity with a structure can be useful if one is trying to dismantle it, or at least work within it in unexpected ways. It is entirely possible that Kate is engaging here in another kind of cross-dressing, performing the good woman while the spirit of the shrew lives on.16

Shakespeare’s female characters exemplify and participate in the questions about sexual

---


16 The play’s induction contains a rare instance of a male character disguising himself as a woman. As with Falstaff’s hasty masquerade in The Merry Wives of Windsor, it is played as a joke. In both cases, the men are much less convincing than female characters who cross-dress, who are unrecognizable even to close relations. Michael Shapiro observes that “only Sly believes that the lord’s page is his wife” (35). There is a distinction between serious and laughable costume exchanges, and when the women do it, their good reasons seem to help establish their disguise. The male characters, who have less at stake, fail to perform with conviction.
identity that society was struggling to either answer or ignore. The theatre’s use of costumes and language seemed interested in reinforcing the existing structure by relying on clothing to establish the dramatis personae and by demonstrating the chaos wreaked by women who did not follow the guidelines that defined a woman’s comportment. Yet the practice contributed mightily to the confusion. As both the conservative pamphleteers and the transgressive Shakespeare demonstrate, sexual identity was not a settled matter. Although many early modern writers insisted otherwise and argued for divinely established strata of class and sex, the fact that the subject was debated at all undermines their assertions. If sex was so clearly defined, there would be no need to remind the populace that the hierarchy was inviolate. Theatre challenged these social assumptions by allowing clothing to establish erroneous identity and relying on language and action to explain or excuse discrepancies.

By finding the gaps in the power of clothing and language (consider how fruitlessly a slandered good woman pleads her innocence), Shakespeare’s women navigate a liminal space in which they are more often defined by what they are not than what they are. In Shakespeare’s plays, women were defined against themselves—the unnatural usurper compared to the ideal woman, the good woman compared to her imagined whore-version, the cross-dresser compared to the self hidden behind the clothes. The theatre revealed the instability of the signifiers used to construct women, which could be dismantled and manipulated to present men as women and angels as whores, casting doubt on the reliability of the system and laying the foundation for the shifting definitions seen more than a century later.

As Jean E. Howard argues, the plays, particularly the ones with cross-dressing plots, are
sites of potential freedom “for female agency and interiority even as they try to contain female will and desire” (n.pag.). The characters usually break select rules in order to uphold others, a practice that set a precedent for subsequent English playwrights seeking to present authoritative women without overtly threatening the social structure. The sometimes contentious relationship between clothing, performance, and language remained at the center of discussions of female behavior and identity into the eighteenth century, both on stage and in novels, as society continued to debate how to best read a woman.
Chapter 2

“Such Perverse Obedience!”: Hannah Cowley’s Unconventionally Traditional Women

In the film *Stage Beauty* (2004), aspiring actress Mrs. Hughes argues with Edward Kynaston, acclaimed for his portrayal of Desdemona, about the prospect of women joining him on the stage. He reminds her of the years he spent studying to play women’s roles, and she flippantly replies that she had “less need of training,” implying that her biological make-up was preparation enough to perform a woman. Although she triumphs in the end, largely due to Kynaston’s tutelage, the film persuasively disproves her assumption. By the Restoration, theatre had spent more than a century learning how to construct effective portrayals of women without them. As Phyllis Rackin points out, “for early modern playgoers the absence of women from the stage and the use of male actors to play their parts was not regarded as a deficiency and...the male actors’ performances of women’s parts were regarded as convincing and taken seriously” (74). Shakespeare’s plays in particular demonstrate the strategies theatre-makers used to both communicate and question the actions and behaviors that defined “woman.” Such work was still being done on the stage in the eighteenth century, and this chapter will examine some of playwright Hannah Cowley’s female characters, who adhered to the broad rules governing their conduct while using unorthodox means to achieve socially-acceptable ends.

As discussed in the previous chapter, costume and language formed a tentative partnership in the endeavor to construct women on Shakespeare’s stage. While costumes seemed
to establish an incontrovertible sexual identity, the fact that men were wearing dresses and wigs undermined the reliability that fretful social monitors wanted to enforce. And even as overtly transgressive women such as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra were punished, others, like Beatrice and Portia, found more subtle ways to assert unusual authority over their fates. Thus, over the years, audiences had learned to expect to see a certain set of behavioral signifiers that told them they were seeing a woman, even if the actor was male. When in 1666 Charles II allowed the first English actresses to perform on the legitimate stage, the presence of biological women neither rendered the system of signs superfluous nor strengthened it. Rather, playwrights continued to find ways to manipulate the codes to transmit ideas and attitudes that were simultaneously traditional and unorthodox.

The theatre was not alone in its exploration of female behavior; numerous books and pamphlets offered advice on the topic as well. Nancy Armstrong points out that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conduct books differed from their eighteenth-century descendants in matters of audience and Puritanism, but even though the earlier books “were not endorsing the preferred cultural norms” as Armstrong argues the later books did, their existence set an important precedent” (n.pag.). Many of their concerns about a woman’s mobility and her duty to the home are seen in the attention given to the domestic sphere by eighteenth-century books. In a time before novels, writers warning against the dangers of public appearances and popular entertainment had theatre as their primary target. Jean Howard, in her study of the early modern stage and social struggle, reports that “women who gadded about outside the house or who talked too much (by male standards) were suspected of being whores...the good woman was closed off:
silent, chaste, and immured within the house” (n. pag.). These sentiments were no less present more than a century later, when the household was being imagined in conduct books “as a world with its own form of social relations” (Armstrong, n. pag.). The Shakespearean stage had established two significant theatrical traditions that lingered into the eighteenth century: first, the communication of a set of signs that were understood to mean “woman,” and second, a relationship (however uneasy) with conduct literature.

While scholars such as Armstrong have established the relationship between conduct manuals and literature, discussions often center on novels, omitting plays from studies linking the development of written fiction to prescriptions for female behavior being set out in conduct books. However, playwrights frequently did engage with discussions taking place on the pages of conduct manuals and often provided models of female behavior that conform to social conventions even as characters questioned the rules they observed. Thus, theatre was as closely tied to conduct manuals as were novels and exercised an equal influence within the expansive conversation about women and society. For example, Jane West’s *The Advantages of Education* (1803), a didactic novel, introduces a young lady contesting the marriage requirement: “I do not chuse to hold up matrimony as the great desideratum of our sex” (3). Two years later, Elizabeth Inchbald seems to support this critique of matrimony in her comic play *To Marry or Not To Marry*, which features a heroine running away from the man her guardian has chosen for her and a hero being persuaded to wed for the good of the family estate. The writers are entering into a conversation about traditional female duties, as Inchbald explores West’s assertion and questions the function and requirement of marriage.
Armstrong argues that the novel’s female individual was in large part formed through the domestic space created by conduct manuals. Separately, Jacqueline Pearson’s examination of women’s reading habits of the era finds that plays were widely read and attended, citing heroines in novels by Burney, Edgeworth, Richardson, and Fielding in which the plays that characters see and read are used to signal their personality.\(^\text{17}\) Such a code would be effective only if novel-readers were familiar with the plays themselves. Therefore, plays cannot be neatly divided from novels in discussions of the eighteenth-century English reading public, and neither can the ties between conduct manuals and the theatre be ignored.

The number of conduct manuals decreased toward the end of the eighteenth century, Armstrong observes, “not because the female ideal they represented passed out of vogue,” but because “the ideal had passed into the domain of common sense where it provided the frame of reference for other kinds of writing, among them the novel” (n.pag.). Although in this passage she admits the influence of other forms of writing, she focuses on the novel, and later seems to credit it alone with the pervasive recognition of the ideal. She explains that Samuel Richardson had to spend pages in *Pamela* detailing “the rules governing sexual relations” that the conduct books had delineated, but by the time Austen began her career, the rules were common knowledge, and Austen “knew perfectly well her readers had identified those rules not only with common sense, if not always with nature, but also with the form of the novel itself” (n.pag.;

\(^\text{17}\) Pearson comments that Fielding’s Amelia Booth in particular offers a contradictory portrait: “She is an idealised wife whose reading symbolizes her dedication to the domestic world which her husband endangers by going out drinking and gambling. But the choice of Farquhar may suggest that she has unadmitted fantasies of resistance, by implying an engagement with images of assertive femininity which she will never overtly espouse” (n. pag.). Reading about transvestites, characters played by cross-dressing actresses, and women who separate from their ineffective husbands could betray a quiet desire to be a part of such resistance, which are found in and expressed through play-reading.
emphasis mine). Armstrong’s final declaration undoes her previous acknowledgment of “other kinds of writing” and discounts the significant contributions theatre made in both the establishment (as per Richardson) and the questioning (a la Austen) of the female ideal.

It should come as no great surprise that theatre helped disseminate the female ideal and the social understanding thereof. For centuries, the English theatre had been in the business of codes and signs. From medieval allegories to the casting of male actors in women’s parts until the Restoration, the English stage participated in a long-standing tradition of manipulating appearances to suit desire. While novels developed interiority and the female subject, the theatre relied on its existing familiarity with systems of signs to reinforce and subvert the work that conduct books were doing.\footnote{This does not mean that conduct manuals’ rules were questioned only in the theatre; on the contrary, many novelists and other writers addressed social issues similarly or even more directly. Although this paper is primarily concerned with the neglected contributions of theatre, there are certainly other mediums, genres, and writers worthy of recognition.}

Conduct book writers often advised their young readers to keep good company and identify an older woman to emulate; plays helpfully modeled behavior for their audience, ostensibly punishing transgressive women and rewarding good ones, but the lines separating the two were blurring.\footnote{I employ the term “audience” in its broadest definition, including everyone who partakes of the text, either by seeing it in the theatre, hearing it read aloud at home, or reading it silently themselves. Although there might arguably be differences in the ways viewers and readers experienced the information plays provided (e.g., a cross-dressed woman on stage certainly differs from an imaginary woman), delineating those subtleties are beyond the scope of this project and not necessary to reinforce my overall argument.} Plays presented women who exhibited all the outward signs that indicated appropriate female behavior, but who found ways to transgress without becoming social pariahs. Again, Shakespeare helped set this precedent through his cross-dressing women like Viola in \textit{Twelfth Night} and Rosalind in \textit{As You Like It}, who violated rules against wearing men’s clothing...
only in order to preserve their safety (i.e., chastity); Oliver Goldsmith experimented with class masquerade in *She Stoops to Conquer*; and as we shall see below, many of Hannah Cowley’s characters devise elaborate deceptions to hoodwink male authority figures. In each case, a socially-accepted marriage results from the misbehavior, rendering it null and nonthreatening.

Similarly, Pearson reports that distinctions between “good readers” and “bad readers” grew increasingly problematic in the eighteenth century; she relates that the influential Duchess of Devonshire claimed an inarguable reason for reading books with “an English reputation for immorality” such as *Les liaisons dangereuses* and Rousseau’s *Confessions*: “her husband had read them and marked them for her, so her reading of an apparently transgressive text is actually dutifully compliant to domestic ideology” (n. pag.). The dual function of reading embodied in plays encouraged an awareness of performance, much as novels like *The Female Quixote*, *Belinda*, and *Northanger Abbey* debated what sorts of fiction ladies ought to read.

A shift in the models of womanhood being presented onstage mirrored an increase in women’s participation in theatre, and like their creations, female playwrights often exhibited a respectable rebellion. Ellen Donkin points out in her study of Hannah Cowley and some of her colleagues that conduct books counseled women against public employment of any kind, assuring them that they were needed at home; Donkin notes that “many women who do take the plunge [and become playwrights] are careful to frame their artistic activities in terms of family duty, providing for children, and so forth” (n. pag.). She stresses that the women’s “determination to provide for their families constituted them as cultural males, but in the context of family survival, their willingness to undertake professional exposure was deemed to be an
unfortunate and necessary sacrifice, more deserving of sympathy than of censure” (n. pag.). Cowley’s heroines perform a similar subterfuge, masking their ambitions behind socially-acceptable results, simultaneously obeying and defying conduct manuals’ instructions.

Hannah Cowley, whose career choice demonstrated the liberating potential that resulted from a combination of duty and defiance, created heroines who rely on a similar duality. They use performance and a manipulation of appearances to engage in activities of which conduct book writers would disapprove—in *Bold Stroke for a Husband*, Olivia constantly refuses the suitors her father puts forth—in order to gain something the heroine wants—in Olivia’s case, Don Julio—that also happens to be something recommended by the conduct books—marriage.

Four of Cowley’s plays in particular provide excellent examples of young ladies apparently breaking the rules, but only to take part in the vital institution of marriage. Even though Dr. John Gregory, in his *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), claims to wish that his daughters “marry for no other reason but to make [themselves] happier” (52), it is hard to believe he would have suggested that the young ladies imitate these heroines, who actively involve themselves in marriage negotiations, reversing the power structure by selecting their own mates and employing deception either of their fathers or their future husbands to achieve their goals. In *The Belle’s Stratagem*, Letitia Hardy re-arranges an arranged marriage in order to make the union a pleasing one to both parties. Elizabeth Doiley is clearly not the answer to the question *Who’s the Dupe?* as she manipulates two suitors and her father to secure an engagement to the man she has already chosen. The pupils of *A School for Greybeards* are taught by Seraphina that love and a woman’s determination always triumph. And Olivia and Victoria each
perform *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, the former by acting the part of a shrew and the latter by pretending to be a man and seducing her husband’s mistress. By ensuring that each heroine reaches a socially-approved result, Cowley is able to present powerful examples of unconventional women, women who wear masks to flirt with men at balls, married women who pretend to elope, women who dress as men and woo other women. Although their methods are unorthodox and even mildly shocking, the fact that all they do is in pursuit of that most appropriate of female occupations—marriage—places them firmly within the definition of “woman” and recognizable on stage as such.

As these brief summaries indicate, Cowley frequently employs disguise and themes of performance. Like Shakespeare, she demonstrates the ease with which people assume and discard masks and personas, including those associated with gender. Her plays propose that everything to do with society is constructed, from the rules governing marriage contracts to the behavior of the men and women participating in them. Characters often comment that they are playing a role, which is both a nod to the theatrical event they are involved in and an acknowledgment that performance defines life.

Through her heroines, Cowley presents an alternate to the definitions set out by conduct books, a guide to breaking and following rules simultaneously. Her plays take material from conduct books, abetting the spread of the female ideal, but they frequently add a slight, almost imperceptible, twist to the prototype before passing it along to spectators and readers. Working within the boundaries of acceptable femininity yet testing their limits allowed Cowley (and her contemporaries) to communicate both the sanctioned version of womanhood and a range of
activities that threatened it.

The Arrangement of Marriage: *The Belle’s Stratagem*

The main characters in *The Belle’s Stratagem*, Letitia Hardy and Doricourt, have been betrothed since childhood, and they have not met since then. At their first meeting as adults, Letitia is smitten, but her quiet demeanor leaves Doricourt unimpressed. He decides he cannot endure marriage to someone so far from his ideal, so he decides to feign madness and flee to the Continent. Sensing his feelings (if not his solution), Letitia concocts a plan to grant both herself and Doricourt the partner of their dreams. She carries out a variety of deceptions. First, she pretends to be an utter dullard, which intensifies Doricourt’s dislike of her. Then, under the cover of a masquerade ball, she flirts with him and employs all her charms to entice him. Finally, she convinces him that Mr. Hardy is on his deathbed (another ruse), and Doricourt marries Letitia, even though his heart belongs to the mysterious figure he met at the ball; at length he discovers that the two are one and the same, and mutual happiness is achieved.

Although many critics have applauded Letitia as a take-charge heroine, Wendy Arons recently presented a counter-argument by observing that while the play “offers a pointed and progressive critique of eighteenth-century gender norms,” it also “participates in reifying patterns of romance and desire which demand a repression or displacement of female sexuality” (264). The article contends that Letitia Hardy merely fulfills the standard task of catering to male desire.

---

as she places herself as an object of the male gaze and submits to the patriarchal stratagems that selected her husband for her in the first place. Arons’ reading is compelling and does not lack shrewd observations, but her conclusion misplaces emphasis; while she expresses disappointment that Cowley participates in portraying acceptable female behavior, she neglects the significance of the authority exerted by that apparently proper young lady in matrimonial matters.

Cowley’s character embodies the way female playwrights and novelists worked within society’s apparatus and used its own devices to question and even undermine it. Although Letitia does indeed operate within the structure of socially-approved marriage and, as Arons observes, limits her sexual desire to a sanctioned object (the man her father has chosen for her to marry), the details that construct this situation, and the fact that she experiences desire at all, cannot be dismissed. Her longing for Doricourt is expressed as she bewails her failure to make a “conquest” of him, recounts his appealing features, and describes her reaction to him in vaguely sexual terms: “as though a sudden ray had pierc’d” her, leaving her “breathless, speechless” (1.4). She decides that either her needs will be met or she’ll refuse to marry him, stating, “I will touch his heart or never be his wife” (1.4). Having placed Letitia’s feelings for Doricourt within propriety, Cowley then permits her heroine to exercise her authority to bring about a conclusion that remains always within the boundaries of acceptable behavior, but satisfies her own desires as well. Rather than advocating a complete destruction of the system, Cowley lays out ways women could function and flourish within it, allowing Letitia to manipulate the very system that

21 A note on the texts: All of the plays cited here were accessed through the online Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections, and as a result, do not have page or line numbers. I have cited the act and scene; complete bibliographic information can be found in the Works Cited section.
constricts her in order to achieve her goal of being an admired and loved wife.

Clearly, Cowley acknowledges that change cannot be achieved simply and honestly. Every plot line in the play involves one or more layers of disguise, and whether at the masquerade ball or not, every character alters his or her appearance or conduct at least once. Letitia engages in multiple deceptions, complicating Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace’s analysis of Letitia’s masked conduct at the ball, as Wallace concludes that “no one is ever so much herself as when she deliberately acts what she is not” (426). Earlier in the play, Letitia has deliberately behaved as if she were foolish and insipid in an attempt to turn Doricourt’s indifference into dislike. She is so successful in this that he decides to pretend to be mad so that Letitia’s father will call off the nuptials. She is equally triumphant in her effort to capture his heart in the guise of a clever and spirited lady at the ball, so if both poses are indeed poses, and it is in the performance that reality is found, which of these contradictory acts is true? Which is the real Letitia?

Even Doricourt doesn’t have an answer. After Letitia reveals herself as the masked woman, the relieved bridegroom exclaims, “You shall be nothing but yourself; nothing can be captivating that you are not” (5.5). Although he seems to believe that the masked Letitia is the true version, his words come in response to her admission of personal flexibility: “You see, I can be any thing; chuse my character, your taste shall fix it” (5.5). After the three versions he has seen—the modest girl on their first meeting who inspired his initial tepid response, the buffoon of their second encounter who turned his indifference to hatred, and the captivating masked woman at the ball—it seems something of a gamble to ask someone so changeable to just be
“herself.”

The alterability of her nature is something Letitia has revealed even before this moment in the final act; at the ball, in the guise of her masked, and therefore charming, self, she tells Doricourt when he asks what she will be when she is married to a man she loves, “Why then, I’d be any thing and all; grave, gay, capricious; the soul of whim, the spirit of variety; live with him in the eye of fashion, or in the shade of retirement; change my country, my sex...cheat him of wishes, and overturn the empire to restore the husband of my heart to the blessings of liberty and love!” (4.1). This proclamation aligns with Doricourt’s stated preference for a woman of “spirit, fire, l’air en jour, that something—that nothing—which every body feels, and nobody can describe” (1.3). The spirit and fire can be seen in her willingness to “overturn the empire,” and that indescribable “nothing” can be understood as “the soul of whim” and “the spirit of variety.”

What Letitia acknowledges in both exchanges is that performance is everything. She is matter-of-fact about her ability and willingness to shift her outward persona for the sake of winning the man she loves. And for Doricourt, this very changeability indicates her true self. The meek young lady he first met, whom he describes as “only a fine girl, complexion, shape, and features—nothing more” (1.3), seems in her undisguised presentation to lack intrigue, secrets, and depth. He sees that she is a “fine girl,” and in the “nothing more,” he perceives a lack of performance that translates to a shortcoming in personality; she could very well be the kind of girl who takes conduct manuals at face value. His desire for spirit and fire condemns all plain-speaking women and seems to elevate dissemblers. He describes his ideal woman poetically: “Give me a woman, in whose touching mein, / A mind, a soul, a polish’d art is seen” (3.1). His
request for a “polish’d art” reveals the importance he places on a woman’s ability to manipulate and present her identity not as a thing fixed and inherent, but as something learned, assumed, and perfected, both in its display and its ephemerality. In fact, the role itself eclipses what might be called the authentic, or as Wallace observes, it becomes “the defining mark of who you are,” and “being who you really are” carries less truth than “playing your role to its fullest extent” (417). Doricourt is so convinced by the artful role that he invites Letitia to be herself after she has offered to be whatever he wants. The persuasive performance of the role does not reveal the true personality behind the mask, but is itself “who you really are.” Doricourt wants Letitia to be a performer, and fortunately for them both, she is. Cowley hints that everyone is.

After all, the very existence of conduct books indicated that women were expected to learn the finer points of a role and perform it accordingly. With a thorough knowledge of the rules, playwrights like Cowley, heroines like Letitia, and ordinary women could all find ways to follow the letter of the law if not the spirit. Cowley explicitly shows her audience that intelligence and performative skill serve a woman better than the useless “accomplishments” they’d been taught to perfect. In her guise of the idiot bumpkin, Letitia mockingly brags, “what a genius I have; how I can cut watch-papers, work cat-gut, make quadril baskets with pins, and take profiles in shades; ay, as well as the lady at No. 62, South Molton-street, Grosvenor-square,” in addition to her unsurpassed expertise at solving conundrums (3.1). The litany appalls Doricourt, signaling that if a young lady wants to follow society’s instructions and win a husband, she might do better if she ignores its advice on how to get him.22 Cowley thus allows

22 In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen takes a similarly dim view of young ladies’ accomplishments. After Mr. Bingley admires their ability to “paint tables, cover skreens, and net purses,” he continues, “I scarcely know any one who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being
her heroines to play the game, but provides them with an alternative set of rules and roles.

The play comments not only on the pursuit of marriage, but also on its tenuous state once achieved, demonstrating that concerns about performance and disguise endure long after the courtship has ended. The predominant portrayal of marriage in this play seems largely informed by the contempt understood to be bred by familiarity. In the first scene of the play, Doricourt’s friend Saville describes the Doricourt-Letitia arrangement, explaining that the match had been made by their fathers when the pair were infants. His listener, the rake Courtall, opines that being brought up together, the two must “by this time care no more for one another, than I do for my country cousins” (1.1). Mr. Hardy feared just such a situation, as Saville goes on to explain that “they never met since thus high, and so probably have some regard for each other...A whim of Mr. Hardy’s; he thought his daughter’s charms would make a more forcible impression, if her lover remain’d in ignorance of ’em, till his return from the Continent” (1.1).

Similarly, Letitia’s despairing report of Doricourt’s initial unenthusiastic response claims that “a husband of fifteen months, could not have examin’d me with more cutting indifference” (1.4). Although Mr. Hardy’s scheme did not have the effect he hoped for, the characterization of longstanding acquaintance leading to boredom and disregard continues throughout the play. The changeable performance of the heroine seems an effective solution to this problem. If identity and the self are not fixed, there is no one predictable person to tire of. The cynical Villers points

---

informed that she was very accomplished.” Darcy, naturally, counters with a sentiment Doricourt (and Letitia) likely share: “Your list of the common extent of accomplishments,” said Darcy, “has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse, or covering a skreen. But I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished” (n.pag.). Some writers of conduct books were also disdainful of the current state of female education and recommended more useful instructions, as will be shown in chapter 3.
out, however, that appealing irregularities do not always last after courtship has resulted in marriage, telling Letitia, “the charms that help’d to catch are generally laid by, one after another, ’till she grows a downright wife, and then runs crying to her mother, because she has transform’d her lover into a downright husband” (5.1). Letitia’s willingness to adapt herself to Doricourt’s desires may indicate a way to circumvent this end, but it also may be a reminder that the idealized rarely withstands the quotidian.

Separately, Doricourt, Letitia, and their individual interlocutors re-live the first meeting, the disappointed lovers’ romantic expectations eliciting scorn and deprecation from their confidantes. Saville asks Doricourt, “did your heart leap or sink when you beheld your mistress?” (1.3), and Letitia complains to Mrs. Racket, “to-day, when I bent my whole heart upon one poor conquest, I have prov’d that all [my] imputed charms amount to nothing” (1.4). Saville goes on to mock Doricourt for not being satisfied with Letitia’s obvious good features, saying, “So miss Hardy, with only beauty, modesty, and merit, is doom’d to the arms of a husband who will despise her” (1.3). Meanwhile, Mrs. Racket castigates Letitia for her desire to elicit affection from her betrothed, calling her a “fool” and “absurd and romantic”; she continues, “If you have no reason to believe his heart pre-engag’d, be satisfied; if he is a man of honour, you’ll have nothing to complain of” (1.4). Her advice seems to echo Dr. Gregory’s caution against expecting too much from men and his preference for marriages built on “esteem and affection” rather than “violent love” (52).

Doricourt and Letitia, however, persist in their determination to have a stimulating partner and a love-match or nothing. Their perspective is countered by Saville’s oblique
scolding, which insinuates that Doricourt should be content with what he has, and the account Mrs. Racket, a widow, provides of her state of mind in the days before her own wedding: “I could not sleep for thinking of my coach, my liveries, and my chairmen; the taste of cloaths I should be presented in, distracted me for a week; and whither I should be married in white or lay-lock, gave me the most cruel anxiety” (1.4). The differences between the lovers and their advisors mark a shift in thinking about marriage. For Saville, beauty and modesty should be all a man requires of a wife, while Doricourt embraces a more progressive model of matrimony, one that encourages spirited, intelligent partners to wed because of emotional rather than economic reasons.\(^\text{23}\)

There is a financial element to the union of Doricourt and Letitia, but Mr. Hardy places his daughter’s happiness above his fiduciary commitments, albeit with some reluctance: “if you don’t like him, hang the signing and sealing, he shan’t have you then; and yet I can’t say that neither, for you know that estate has cost his father and me upwards of fourscore thousand pounds; must go all to him, if you won’t have him” (1.4). Letitia’s lack of concern for all things monetary contrasts not only with her father, but also with Mrs. Racket, who, like Saville, serves as an example of the old guard. Mrs. Racket makes it clear that she married for money; the fact that she is a widow and apparently still young and vivacious hints that her husband might have been some years her senior and was considerate enough to expire while she still had the ability to enjoy the financial security that he ensured. Letitia’s concerns are less materialistic. Claiming that “spirit or invention” will win her man, she scorns her father’s advice to improve her looks:

\(^{23}\) The reasons behind marriage are a topic of discussion in novels as well, particularly those of Jane Austen, Her heroines frequently engage in debates that seek to balance the very real fiscal concerns of unemployable women with the desire for a less mercenary impetus to matrimony.
“It is not my toilet that can serve me, but a plan has struck me...which flatters me with brilliant success” (1.4). Letitia, firm in her blossoming agency, knows her own conditions for marriage and recognizes how to achieve her goal. She also again disproves the soundness of conduct manuals’ advice against action and good sense by orchestrating and performing in a variety of provocative deceptions.

Cowley positions performance as a link in the chain that binds society and marriage. The marital institution might be an unmovable component in the patriarchal system, and its rules, as Misty G. Anderson points out with the help of another Cowley heroine, might be made by men, but in acknowledging marriage’s importance and permanence, the play recognizes the power women wield within it. If society depends on marriage for stability, and if performance is necessary for marriage to occur, then society cannot flourish without performance. As Wallace points out, “Cowley seems to lean toward the notion that identity...need not be stamped irretrievably and essentially on the soul...[She] champions the experience of those...who stand to gain much from a performance-based theory of human identity” (417). Therefore, Letitia’s skillful performances and shifting identities can be said to uphold the socially-approved marriage apparatus, ostensibly posing no threat. She acts, however, not for the good of society, but to achieve her own desires, and the methods she employs toward this end are unorthodox and potentially liberating.

24 Anderson notes in Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy (New York: Palgrave, 2002), “Bella’s parting shot in Cowley’s The Runaway critiques the marriage vow: ‘Love, one might manage that perhaps—but honour, obey,—’tis strange the Ladies had never interest enough to get this ungallant form mended’ (V.i, 72). Bella’s assessment of the ladies’ lack of ‘interest’ or political clout provides the implicit explanation; marriage law has been written by and tends to serve the interests of men. Women may participate in this contract, but in the legal sense, they do not compose it” (49).
The Doricourt-Letitia union and the contrast provided by the commentary and example of Saville and Mrs. Racket are not the only portrayals of marriage in the play; a sizable subplot follows the travails of newlyweds Sir George and Lady Frances Touchwood. Their relationship seems to suffer from a lack of performance. The couple is depicted as being attached to each other in a manner quite unnatural in spouses. When Mrs. Racket asks if there is something odd about Sir George, Villers replies, “Nothing, but that he’s passionately fond of his wife” and goes on to illustrate the extent of his passion, reporting that “so petulant is his love, that he open’d the cage of a favourite bull-finch, and sent it to catch butterflies, because she rewarded his song with kisses” (1.4). Mrs. Racket responds that she “can see no difference between the torment of such an affection, and hatred” (1.4). Moderation may be, at least in part, the lesson Cowley hopes to teach through the Touchwoods. While Letitia fears a life with a husband immune to her charms and indifferent to her person, Sir George and Lady Frances illustrate the equal difficulty that may be encountered at the other extreme. Too much attention and devotion can stifle and bind a woman, keeping her caged while the bird flies free. Lady Frances tells Mrs. Racket, when asked whether she prefers to stay in London or return to the countryside, “I have not the habit of consulting my own wishes; but I think if they decide, we shall not return immediately; I have yet hardly form’d an idea of London” (2.1). Compare her plaintive remark with Mr. Hardy’s characterization of his willful daughter and her plans: “Well, ’tis an odd thing, I can’t understand it; but I foresee Letty will have her way, and so I shan’t give myself the trouble to dispute it” (1.4).

Lady Frances is so naïve and unaccustomed to the ways of society that she narrowly
escapes a reputation-ruining encounter with Courtall (she is saved by her gracefully disappointed suitor Saville). Guileless and honest, Lady Frances acts the same to everyone and in every situation. Although at the end of the play Saville admonishes Sir George for trying to keep her away from society when she should be setting a shining example for its members, it is doubtful that she could ever be as successful as Letitia. Her ignorance of the role she is expected to play fails to excuse her inability to perform it, and when she shows the world the same self she shows her husband, her behavior is tantamount to infidelity. While Sir George admires her for her purity and lack of a “polish’d art,” he seems unaware that too much innocence can do more harm than good. The subplot thus reinforces the interdependence of performance, marriage, and society, further strengthening women’s license to transgress in order to obey.

By acknowledging the importance of marriage within a properly-functioning social order, Cowley positions herself, her plays, and her heroines as champions of the feminine ideal. However, she relies on a strict observation of some rules to enable the violation of others, resulting in a kind of “Cowley clause”: a nice girl doesn’t don a mask and flirt with a man at public balls—unless she’s already betrothed to the man and wants to make him love her. There is always an exception for Cowley’s heroines, a situation in which unorthodox behavior is acceptable because it seems to be the only recourse available in their pursuit of a socially satisfactory result. These carefully constructed loopholes demonstrate how a woman could perform the role of a daughter willing to wed who her father has selected for her while ensuring that his choice would make her happy as well. Even more significantly, Cowley’s heroines must exploit these opportunities for transgression in order to achieve what they (and society) want;
breaking the rules is therefore necessary, which calls into question the validity of the rules themselves.

**Educated Men: Who’s the Dupe?**

*Who’s the Dupe?* is a winning little farce whose plot foreshadows *The Belle’s Stratagem*. Both *Dupe* and *Belle* feature witty and intelligent heroines determined to marry the man of her choice; in both plays, the woman concocts the schemes and drives the action. The women achieve their goals, and they do so through the manipulation of performance. In *Who’s the Dupe?*, Elizabeth Doiley has decided she will marry Captain Granger, a second son who has exhausted his slight inheritance and is unable to extract a larger allowance from his older brother. Elizabeth’s father, ignorant of his daughter’s promises to Granger, is making arrangements of his own. He is a merchant who has worked hard to amass his fortune (a point he emphasizes whenever the opportunity arises), and he is determined that his only child should marry a man of learning; in fact, he wants her to marry the kind of man she would have been had she not been born a girl.

Unlike the pliant and good-natured Mr. Hardy of *The Belle’s Stratagem*, Mr. Doiley refuses to allow his daughter to have a say in her marital arrangements. Since Mr. Doiley is unaware of Granger’s identity, Granger is presented to him as a scholar, and thus a likely candidate for Elizabeth’s hand. Meanwhile, Elizabeth and her cousin Charlotte have tricked Mr. Gradus, Mr. Doiley’s original choice for a son-in-law, into believing that Mr. Doiley merely pretends to be stern and strict, but will in fact allow his daughter to select her husband, regardless
of his own opinion; Gradus’s only chance to win Elizabeth’s favor, Charlotte tells him, is to act
the dandy and woo the daughter, not the father. With each man assuming an unfamiliar role, they
are set to a battle of wits by Mr. Doiley, who, being unschooled himself, is unable to tell
Granger’s nonsense from Gradus’s philosophy. Granger, Elizabeth, and performance triumph.

Letitia and Elizabeth share another similarity: they are both heiresses. Mr. Hardy, though
willing to abide by the terms of his arrangement with Doricourt’s father and forfeit his
investment if his daughter does not care for her intended, would clearly much rather not. Mr.
Doiley is very concerned about his money and who should inherit it by marrying Elizabeth.
Granger, unlike Doricourt, is a nearly impoverished second son. The financial inequality between
the lovers places Elizabeth in the more powerful position. Granger offers to run away with
Elizabeth when it seems that her father will make their intended marriage impossible. An
elopement could result in a loss of Mr. Doiley’s approbation in a very tangible way, which leads
Elizabeth to concoct the plan that will secure her father’s blessing, a fortune, and the man she
loves.

Whereas The Belle’s Stratagem contrasts modesty, social idiocy, and witty savoir-faire
(all in one girl), Who’s the Dupe? pits two men against each other: the scholar and the soldier. It
might be more accurate to say, however, that four men participate in the battle of wits: the
learned Mr. Gradus pretending to be a society beau, and the dashing Captain Granger pretending
to be a man of letters. Neither of them is entirely convincing, though they do successfully fool
their intended audience, Mr. Doiley. Gradus, unable to conceal his original persona completely,
maintains his classical references even when swearing that he has left them behind, saying,
“Fix’d as Ixion on his wheel—I have no study now but the Ton.” His task is more difficult than Granger’s, for Gradus attempts to please both father and daughter, while Granger needs only convince Mr. Doiley.

Gradus therefore struggles as he assures Elizabeth that his transformation is complete and unalterable, that he is “but now created” because her “charms” have given him “a new existence” (2.1), and then tries to persuade her father of the opposite. Mr. Doiley comments, “he has turned little Easop upside down—he’s the Lion in the skin of an Ass” (2.1). Gradus’s reassurances that “the skin...may be put off” are interrupted by Elizabeth’s co-conspirator Sandford’s reminder that such talk will lose him Elizabeth’s affection (2.1). Perplexed, Gradus recognizes the clash between performer and role, lamenting, “Dear Madam! believe me, that as for—what can I say—how assimilate myself to two such opposite tastes? I stand reeling between two characters, like a Substantive between two Adjectives” (2.1). Again, Cowley indicates that truth resides in the performance, and the better a man acts, the better he is, regardless of whether he is acting what he believes to be his true self or an assigned role.

While Letitia moved easily between her three roles in *The Belle’s Stratagem*, Gradus and Granger make no attempt to conceal the difficulties they encounter when engaging in pretense. Like Lady Frances, who knew nothing of society’s rules, Gradus has to be carefully taught by Sandford and his friends how to dress, how to drink, and how to speak. Cowley points out how little social behavior is natural or essential, and how much of it is learned. But just as Saville declares Lady Frances immune to the harmful influences of frivolous society, Gradus is unable to assimilate completely—his deep devotion to his scholarship remains unchanged. Unlike Letitia,
who claims the ability to be anything, Gradus can really only be himself, or the role he plays most easily: the stiff and serious scholar.

Granger, secure in Elizabeth’s favor, has only her father’s approval to seek. His tutor for the evening’s showdown has been a dictionary, which he studied for a half hour, trusting that he has “pick’d up cramp words enough to puzzle and delight the Old Gentleman the remainder of his life” (2.1). His task is indeed relatively easy, since Mr. Doiley cannot catch him out if he spouts sheer nonsense (which he does). The lack of pressure to inhabit his role completely seems to result in a more relaxed performance. He experiences no small amount of stage fright when Mr. Doiley first brings in Gradus and proposes a battle of wits between the two, with Elizabeth as the prize. Granger rightly recognizes that Gradus could reveal him as a fake. However, Gradus’s earlier variations of beau and brain have destroyed the credibility he had established, and Mr. Doiley refuses to believe him over Granger. After instructing them both to speak Greek, Mr. Doiley discounts Gradus’s assessment of Granger’s locution, which is in fact a string of complex and uncommon English words he has gleaned from the dictionary. Since Gradus is the only one in the room who can distinguish real Greek from false, he is alone in his judgment and given no credit. Granger, who has played his part with authority, wins the debate and the hand of Elizabeth.

Gradus receives a reward for his inability to assume a different character, as Elizabeth’s cousin Charlotte accepts his proposal and stipulates “that, in your character of Husband, you will

---

25 As disturbing as it is to consider women as trifles to be bestowed at the whim of their fathers, Elizabeth has fixed the game in her own favor. Misty G. Anderson has noted that many comic heroines “use knowledge of their economic value to maneuver through the courtship narrative to a better marriage” (68). To Elizabeth, it must seem that Granger, not herself, is the prize—she is gambling on her father’s stated preferences for traits a son-in-law must exhibit, and she is, as it were, playing with loaded dice.
be as singular and old-fashion’d as the Wig you were this morning” (2.1). Like Doricourt, Charlotte asks her lover to be himself (although Gradus has fewer selves to choose from than Letitia). True to the Cowley credo, the role Gradus played best is the one Charlotte prefers, even if that role appears to be his true self and not a role at all.

While Cowley is certainly having Shakespearean fun at the expense of the university wits by questioning the importance of higher education, she is also skeptical of the prototypical male-female power dynamic. There is never any doubt that Elizabeth will be a dutiful daughter and abide by her father’s wishes, but again, Cowley provides room to maneuver: Elizabeth will marry the man her father chooses, but she will guide his choice by any means necessary. Mr. Doiley’s desire for a well-educated son-in-law provides the impetus for Elizabeth’s subterfuge, but once her plan is plotted and enacted, she controls the action. She scolds Granger that he is “a mere bungler at contrivance,” and demands that he “be guided by” her (1.1). A few lines later she tells him that she has worked out the necessary details with her cousin, Charlotte, “who has understanding and wit”; she reassures him that little is expected from him, saying, “you have only to be obedient” (1.1). The inversion of gender roles is solidified and made visual for a theatre audience just moments later when, in order to escape detection by Mr. Doiley and Gradus, Granger must disguise himself as Mrs. Taffety, Elizabeth’s mantua-maker, an idea he initially protests:

**Granger:** What! make a Woman of me!—by Jupiter [sic]—

**Charlotte:** Lay your commands on him—if he doesn’t submit, we are ruin’d.

**Elizabeth:** Oh, you shall, I protest—here—I’ll put his cap on. (1.1)
He is being made a woman in more ways than one. He has already adopted a submissive position by promising Elizabeth “I am perfectly obedient” when she instructs him that all she requires from him is acquiescence (1.1). Charlotte, in the exchange above, recognizes Elizabeth as the authority figure capable of giving commands and seeing them followed.

Once dressed as Mrs. Taffety and told to speak “broken English,” Granger seems to relish the role. He finds freedom in his disguise and voices his disapproval of Mr. Doiley’s selection with a frankness that would have permissible neither in polite Elizabeth nor gallant Captain Granger. As an outsider, Granger’s Mrs. Taffety can remark and insult with no threat of reprisals or challenges, so he offers his opinion of Gradus: “He speak like a Dictionary-maker, and look like a Physician,” asserting that Gradus might make a fine professor, but would most likely be such a bad husband that his wife would find comfort in the arms of other men. The prediction of cuckoldry serves to threaten Gradus’s masculinity while reinforcing the virility of the man who might step in to satisfy the future Mrs. Gradus—the implication being that the first in line for such an agreeable task would be Granger himself, who is at the moment he speaks the line dressed in skirts, following the orders of his sweetheart, and perhaps in need of a little manly bravado.

The hasty disguise that hides Granger from Mr. Doiley is not the only significant scene in which costume figures. When Gradus and Granger make their appearances as the fop and the scholar, respectively, they rely on their clothing to advertise the corresponding shift in their personas. Thus Mr. Doiley scarcely needs to overhear Gradus abjure his studies to realize that the man before him now differs from the one who visited that morning, who was, in Charlotte’s
words, habited like an elderly man “in a grizzle wig...A dingy brown coat, with vellom button-holes” (1.1). The transformed Gradus and Sandford agree that he doesn’t look as though he’d ever been near a college, and Charlotte pronounces him much improved, praising his “sattins and tassels, and spangles and foils” (1.1).

When Elizabeth enters and witnesses the new version of Gradus, he credits his metamorphosis to her “charms,” though the audience (and of course Elizabeth) knows that the change should be credited to the lessons administered by Sandford and to the clothes. By visually aligning himself with a recognizable type of man, Gradus immediately undermines the impression he made earlier with Mr. Doiley, which in turn damages his performance in the battle of wits against Granger, as seen above. Just as Gradus’s clothing weakens his showing, Granger’s costume creates his credibility entirely. His somber clothing (given in the stage directions merely as “black”), quiet attitude, and use of multisyllabic and uncommon words combine to convince Mr. Doiley that he is the serious scholar; Gradus, who looks like a fool, is judged to be one. Since Mr. Doiley lacks the education to differentiate Greek from complex English, he relies on appearances and lets the costume (and the performance) be his guide.

Unlike Mr. Doiley, the audience has been warned early on not to trust appearances, as Sandford observes “two fine Girls” on his stroll through the park: “if they dont hang out false colours, of the right sort—I’ll try ’em—half afraid—the Women dress so equivocally, that one is in danger of attacking a Countess, when one only means to address a Nymph of King’s-Place” (1.1). A concern that women from different levels of class and virtue might lose their distinction is also present in *The Belle’s Stratagem*, where both the immaculate Lady Frances and the
virginal Letitia are mistaken for prostitutes at the masquerade. If women can no longer be accurately understood by their clothing and outward appearance, then the way they conduct themselves—their performance—becomes the only method for proper identification. Cowley’s plays, therefore, move to establish a new system of signs by which women can be recognized, presenting characters of independence, wit, decisiveness, and control. Her heroines negotiate the boundaries that govern their lives, such as patriarchy and marriage, in ways that seem nonthreatening: Letitia and Elizabeth both wed the men their fathers have chosen for them, but they have manipulated circumstances and male expectations to achieve results that satisfy not just the men in their lives, but also—and primarily—theirselfs.

Cowley’s heroines frequently capitalize on men’s low opinion of women’s abilities to maneuver around the rules these men have established. Both Mr. Doiley and Gradus express disdain for women’s mental acumen, and Gradus believes that women shouldn’t be taught to read, telling Elizabeth, “The more simple your education, the nearer you approach the pure manners of the purest ages. The charms of Women were never more powerful—never inspired such achievements, as in those immortal periods, when they could neither read, nor write” (1.1). His pronouncement comes in response to Elizabeth’s reminder that his learned, classical references are meaningless to her since “the education given to Women shuts us entirely from such refined acquaintance” (1.1). While this statement can be read as a rebuke on the unequal education given to men and women, by the end of the play, it can also be understood as a commentary on the mental superiority of women. Even lacking the extensive college education of an esteemed scholar like Gradus, even without the wisdom amassed by years as a prosperous
businessman like Mr. Doiley, Elizabeth outwits them both. Cowley’s acknowledgement of the educational gender gap may reflect the continuous publication of defenses of women’s learning and the on-going debate of the topic. In a collection of essays published the same year as Who’s the Dupe?, Vicesimus Knox scolds the low standards society has set for women, and by extension, the state of marriage, writing, “I must confess, I ever thought it the most valuable recommendation of a wife to be capable of becoming a conversable companion to her husband, not did I ever conceive that the qualifications of a cook-maid, a laundress, or a house-keeper were the most desirable accomplishments in a partner for life” (109). Following the pattern of disguising revolutionary ideas for female conduct within a profession of concern for men and society, books defending women’s education reinforce the conventional yet rebellious heroines within Cowley’s plays.

In fact, as Penny Gay points out in her study of roles for women on the eighteenth-century stage, Letitia “embodies a dangerous and unpredictable femininity...her role in the courtship is educative of her proposed husband” (22). The same can be said of Elizabeth, who manages her betrothal by instructing almost all of the other characters. When Granger agrees to obey her plan, he begs, “pray give me my lesson!” (1.1). Similarly, when Charlotte persuades Gradus to abandon his current apparel and conduct for the guise of a society fop, she requires him to “yield” to her, and he asks for “more lessons” (1.1). Their conversation also contains an

26 Mary Wollstonecraft’s Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1788), Hester Chapone’s Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady (1773), and Vicesimus Knox’s Essays Moral and Literary (1779) are but three examples of such books published in Cowley’s lifetime. Earlier writers such as Judith Drake and Mary Astell continued to be widely read. For a thorough discussion of the role of the education debate within fiction, see Sharon Smith Palo’s “The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study: Romance and Women’s Learning in Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote,” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 18.2 (2006): 203-228.

27 This last comes after she has allowed him to kiss her, so it may be safe to assume that some of the traditional feminine wiles were occasionally employed, though always within the bounds of propriety; for example, the
acknowledgement of the difference between knowledge gleaned from books and the understanding that comes from active participation in the world; Charlotte observes that he has spent so much time studying the dead languages that he has neglected to learn how to function among the living. The play ends with Gradus commenting on his new relationship with Charlotte, showing his blossoming comprehension of the English language by punning on the word “engaged” and acknowledging the importance of performance in all things: “You see I have just engaged a Tutor to teach me to read the World; and if I play my part there as well as I did at Brazen-Nose, your indulgence will grant me applause” (2.1). Much as Letitia nods repeatedly to her participation in and reliance upon performance to construct an identity that will please her prospective spouse, so Gradus has learned the moral of his story, leaving Mr. Doiley as the sole, yet contented, dupe.

**Out with the Old: A School for Greybeards**

_A School for Greybeards_ (1786) administers a different kind of education. A cautionary tale addressing both men and women, the play advises them to choose their mates carefully. Its plots are more haphazard than the detailed schemes laid in other Cowley plays, and the men participate in the action to a greater extent. Overall, the play champions love and mutual regard as the best reasons for marriage and argues against broad age discrepancies between partners. The female characters also make a strong case for their own trustworthiness and reliability. They earnestly assert their virtue by both performing and explaining its importance.

masked Letitia warns Doricourt against taking liberties when he praises the color and shape of her lips. In this case, however, it seems that Charlotte surpasses Gradus in both social and physical expertise.  

28 The site of his college.
The play, which is set in Portugal, contains three inter-connected love plots. Young Antonia is about to wed Don Gasper, a man forty-seven years her senior. Her betrothed, Don Henry, has been banished for fighting a duel, and Gasper has told her Henry died en route to exile in Mexico. Don Gasper is ambivalent about marrying for a second time and claims to be doing so only because his adult son Don Octavio refuses to find a wife and produce an heir. Octavio, however, has recently seen a woman whose beauty has tempted him to reconsider his reluctant attitude toward matrimony. He believes this woman to be Viola, the daughter of his father’s friend Don Alexis; she is, in fact, Alexis’s young wife Seraphina, who uses the misunderstanding to help Viola elope with Don Sebastian, of whom Alexis disapproves (for reasons that are never made clear). The ending is not entirely satisfying from a comedic perspective. Although the two pairs of young lovers are properly united (Viola and Sebastian, and Henry and Antonia), the entertainingly mischievous Seraphina remains wife to a jealous elderly husband, and though Gasper and Octavio seem relieved to have avoided the bonds of matrimony, Gasper is clearly no closer to getting the grandchild he so keenly desires. Even though it might be tempting to think that Seraphina and Octavio become lovers, an event he hints at, she maintains her commitment to her marriage vows (if not necessarily to her husband).

While other Cowley plays assert women’s wit and competence, *A School for Greybeards* focuses on moral fiber. Its women are loyal, true to promises made in love and in marriage. The second half of the complete title of the play, *A School for Greybeards, or The Mourning Bride*, refers to Antonia. Although Henry makes repeated (and unfair) references to Antonia’s perfidy, she faces her wedding day with sorrow, and explains her decision to accept Gasper’s proposal as
an indication of her abiding love for Henry: “Think not my heart perfidious. Had I chose a youthful husband, you might have term’d me fickle—but from those I fled—abhorr’d a second love, and fix’d where venerable age secured my heart from every tender impulse. A guardian ’twas I ask’d, and not a husband” (3.2). Henry refuses to believe her at first, claiming that all women are false, so Antonia puts the situation in even plainer terms for him, saying, “But think, reproachful man! consider my high birth, and slender fortunes—Behold me a lonely orphan, haunted by a train of lovers—some too high in rank to make them fear to act, whate’er their wishes prompted. ‘Twas to escape all these—“ (3.2).

The reminder of her economic situation proves an effective argument. Antonia’s position is therefore the opposite of Letitia’s and Elizabeth’s; whereas their fortunes provided them with the power to bargain on their own behalf in the marriage market, Antonia is clearly a hostage to her slender means. Her high birth offers no security when there is no money to reinforce it. She insinuates that her honor was being threatened by young men who would have had her by force, compromising her reputation beyond repair. While giving Antonia a strong argument against Henry’s accusations of infidelity, Cowley also reveals the danger inherent in a social system that appraises the value of women on their financial holdings alone. Rather than strengthen society, it can cause instability and unhappiness. Seraphina, who ends the play still married to the much-older Alexis, proves the dysfunction of unsuitable matches. Alexis frequently laments his decision to marry a younger woman, warns Gasper to reconsider his own plans, and lives in constant fear that his wife will make a fool of him.

Cowley does not explain why Seraphina married Alexis, although given Antonia’s
rationale for accepting Gasper, it seems logical to conclude that Seraphina’s reasoning was similar. She seems to handle her lopsided marriage with good humor and provides strenuous assertions of her fidelity to Alexis. Like Sir George in The Belle’s Stratagem, Alexis wants to keep his wife shut away from society lest she make him a cuckold. Seraphina tells him that the more he tries to hide her, the more she will resist. He protests that if there aren’t walls and doors to keep her true, nothing will. She counters:

SERAPHINA My honour! Rely on that, and I swear to you by every thing sacred, that no vestal’s life shall be more blameless. It is due to my own feelings to be chaste—I don’t condescend to think of yours in the affair. The respect I bear myself, makes me necessarily preserve my purity—but if I am suspected, watch’d, and haunted, I know not but such torment may weary me out of principles, which I have hitherto cherish’d as my life. (2.1)

Here Cowley places the responsibility for purity squarely on the woman, which is not in itself unusual, but the assertion of self-respect seems remarkably modern. Seraphina is not preserving her reputation for the sake of patriarchal concerns; maintaining an unblemished line of male heirs for him is of no significance to her, as she admits to not thinking of her husband in the least.29 Above all, she values her own personal sense of honor and self-respect, an observation she repeats near the close of the play when it is necessary to assure him that she behaved with propriety even when she seemed to elope with Octavio: “no woman can be alone, nor in the power of any man, whilst she respects herself, and is guarded by a sense of her duty” (5.4).

29 Since Alexis’s only child by his first wife is Viola, it seems safe to assume that Alexis, like Gasper, may have seen marriage to a younger wife as necessary for reasons of estate and inheritance.
Seraphina thus claims a value as a woman that stands independent of all external forces and is linked neither to men nor money. As numerous scholars have observed, attitudes toward marriage underwent drastic changes throughout the eighteenth century, moving from a “model of sovereign and subject to one based on mutuality and companionship” (Roulson 25). The shift away from economically-driven, parentally-arranged unions concerned writers of conduct books, who feared that, as Wendy Moore reports, “the emphasis on self-expression, free will, and personal feelings in early 18th-century novels” were responsible for “undermining the concept of arranged marriages and fueling expectations of romantic love” (8). She also points out that love-matches typically ended more happily in fiction than in reality, an issue that Cowley addresses here by illustrating the flaws in the previous system. Seraphina and Antonia seem to have agreed to their respective betrothals to Alexis and Gasper for reasons other than affection, and the result hardly makes a strong case against marrying for love. Emma Griffin, in her study of the effect of real wage increases and cultural norms on eighteenth-century nuptial patterns, states that although communities consistently “wanted stable, prosperous, economically viable marriages...the balance between the forces governing marriage was subject to shifts over the long term”; namely “a shift in emphasis between economics and culture” (129). Seraphina’s statements therefore reflect the emerging priority of emotion over finance as she stakes a position for women outside of the established social structure, even while she remains physically within it. As in *The Belle’s Stratagem* and *Who’s the Dupe?*, marriages based on love rather than fortune or position play key roles in allowing women more control over their lives by giving them a say in with whom those lives may be lived. From a distance of more than two hundred years, it might
appear that women were merely being given the choice of a jailor even as they remained imprisoned, and history often bears out such an argument. But for Hannah Cowley, who was working within a definite set of restrictions, both those imposed culturally by the society in which she lived and those dictated by the theatre censors to whom every play produced on the London stage had to be submitted and approved, radical ideas like women’s rights had to be approached with caution.

Therefore, any perceived contradictions in Cowley’s plays that seem to point to an ambivalence toward women’s rights are probably not accidental. If the overall work cannot be said to threaten society or take a political stance, then any irregularities within the text might be excused. To a father or prospective husband, whether a woman preserved her virginity for his sake or her own mattered little; for a woman, self-respect could be transformative. Although Seraphina is unable to change her own situation, her strong will and quick thinking saves her step-daughter from a marriage to a man she does not love. She also preserves Viola’s relationship with her father by an elaborate manipulation of him and Octavio that results in Alexis suggesting to Viola that Sebastian is a better match for her after all. He means it in jest, but Viola is able to maintain the appearance of having behaved like a dutiful daughter when she does marry Sebastian and tells her father with all honesty, “Dear, Sir, you assured me, that of the two fools

30 At the end of her career, Cowley published a letter along with the text of her play, A Day in Turkey. She claims to be responding to rumors that she has written a political play, protesting, with apologies to Miss Wollstonecraft, that an involvement in politics in “unfeminine” (emphasis hers). She goes on to give her definition of comedy as “a picture of life—a record of passing manners—a mirror to reflect to succeeding times the characters and follies of the present.” She reminds her readers that the opinions expressed by her characters are not necessarily her own, refusing to be “accountable” for a character’s “sentiments.” While it may be taking liberties to apply her apologia for one specific play to her entire oeuvre, it is tempting to read her brief letter as a clever use of her author’s mask. Like so many of her characters, who acknowledge their performances, she may be turning her head to hide a wink.
you preferred him” (5.4). Viola joins the ranks of Letitia and Elizabeth, daughters who have met the expectations of their fathers while also satisfying themselves.

Cowley again echoes but adapts expert advice. Dr. John Gregory’s A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters (1774) advised young ladies contemplating marriage to choose wisely. “Settle in your own minds, what are the requisites to your happiness in a married state,” Gregory counseled, but added a less encouraging caution: “and as it is almost impossible that you should get everything you wish, come to a steady determination what you are to consider as essential, and what may be sacrificed” (52). Although Gregory observed that “men of real genius” will appreciate “a woman of great parts,” he warns, seemingly without a trace of irony, “such a [man] will seldom fall in your way” (46), leaving a young lady with “very little probability of marrying for love” (50). Cowley gently refutes these sentiments by demonstrating how a woman of parts can exercise her intelligence and marry for love, with the help of performance.

The themes of disguise and performance are slightly more subtle in this play than in others. Seraphina does not set out to deliberately trick Octavio into believing she is Viola, but when it becomes obvious that he has made that mistake, she decides not to correct him and see if the misunderstanding can be useful. The most consciously disguised figure is Henry, who passes himself off as Gasper’s nephew Julio in order to gain access to his home. Gasper, who hasn’t seen his relation in many years, has no cause to doubt the veracity of his story and makes many comments about the great resemblance “Julio” bears to his mother, Gasper’s sister. Alexis, who exercises reason in everyone’s affairs except his own, disagrees and points out the difference in the color of their eyes and hair, but Gasper dismisses him. The play exploits the basic human
desire to see what one wants to see, so Gasper not only reads his dead sister in Henry’s visage, but he also believes that an exchange of vows between Antonia and Henry is instead a discussion of Antonia’s devotion to him.

In *The Belle’s Stratagem*, Letitia assumes a different vocabulary each time she changes her persona. In *Who’s the Dupe?* language helps Gradus and Granger establish their new characters. And in *School for Greybeards*, words can be trusted no more than appearances. Seraphina promises Octavio that she will be his when Alexis decrees it so, knowing full well such an event will never happen. Antonia tells Henry, “Thus then I invoke the sacred powers to witness my resolve—Never to know another love! never to hold myself bound by any vows, but those made to the lord of my affections, the contracted husband of my heart!” (3.2), knowing that Gasper will understand himself to be her “contracted husband,” while Henry knows that she refers to him instead.\(^{31}\) Given the unreliability of language in this play, it is perhaps understandable that Alexis may not entirely believe Seraphina’s protestations of fidelity, but she has told very few falsehoods in the course of her scheme, and Cowley seems firm in her commitment to presenting blameless yet independent women for her audience.

*What a Woman Wants: A Bold Stroke for a Husband*

In *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1784), Cowley takes a much more dim view of the honor of men as she again presents a story of deception for love’s sake. Much like *The Belle’s Stratagem*, *Bold Stroke* relies on performance and its heroines’ skilled deceptions to ensure

---

\(^{31}\) Henry asserts his right to marry Antonia repeatedly, accusing Gasper of “robbing” him of his bride. It seems that papers had been drawn up detailing the match, which would have been rendered null had Henry in fact died. As a result of this detail, Gasper’s marriage to Antonia is presented as both unnatural and illegal.
happy marriages and a functioning society. As the other plays do, *Bold Stroke* excuses rebellion by making radical acts necessary. Although the plot is often amusing, it also contains a strain of melancholy reminiscent of some of Shakespeare’s comedies, as it observes the limits of what a woman can and cannot do, even when she finds temporary freedom defying the usual strictures of propriety. The play supports marriage for love even while it demonstrates the potential unhappiness that can follow the ceremony. Again, Cowley both encourages and cautions her audience by providing examples that excuse transgression.

As the play opens, Don Carlos paces the streets of Madrid, infuriated that his mistress, Donna Laura, has chosen to bestow her charms on another. In a chance meeting with his friend Don Julio, Carlos reveals how he grew bored with his marriage, dallied with peasant girls in his village, and finally came to Madrid to escape his wife’s recriminations. He also tells Julio that he has given Laura a settlement of family lands, and if he fails to retrieve it from her, he will be penniless. The second plot concerns Olivia, who has been resisting her father’s attempts to marry her off by pretending to be an ill-humored shrew. Desperate to find her a husband so she can start producing male heirs, Don Caesar (anticipating *A School for Greybeards* down to a discussion of age and gout) threatens to re-marry and set about the business himself. Olivia, though, gambles that her father is bluffing and decides to wait until he presents to her the man she has already decided to marry: Don Julio. Olivia’s cousin, Victoria, pays a visit and explains that, disguised as a cavalier named Florio, she has successfully courted her husband’s mistress, and all that remains is to secure the return of the settlement, which she hopes will also restore her husband to her. The women’s plots and deceptions give them the results they’d hoped for: Olivia gets the husband
she wants, Victoria gets her husband back, and young Marcella avoids marrying the elderly Caesar.

Perhaps more than any of Cowley’s other plays, *Bold Stroke* begs to be read alongside Shakespeare. The cross-dressing Victoria follows the tradition of Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Viola of *Twelfth Night*, both of whom woo the women loved by the men they love.

The debt the fake shrew Olivia owes to Katherine is obvious and acknowledged in the text. Olivia has successfully dissuaded Don Garcia from pursuing her for his wife, and he tells her, “perhaps you may meet a Petruchio, gentle Catherine, yet” (1.2). She responds with scorn, questioning whether Kate was in fact a shrew:

*OLIVIA*  But no gentle Catherine will he find me, believe it.—Catherine! why she had not the spirit of a roasted chesnut—a few big words, an empty oath, and a scanty dinner, made her as submissive as a spaniel. My fire will not be so soon extinguished—it shall resist big words, oaths, and starving. (1.2)\(^{32}\)

Olivia, however, makes it clear that though she has fire, she is not by nature unpleasant, but merely assumes a shrewish persona to frighten away unwanted suitors. The subterfuge allows for moments of comedy; when she tells the truth to Garcia, insisting, “Oh, Sir! all that is past was in

---

\(^{32}\) The spelling of Shakespeare’s “Katherina” as “Catherine” puts the reader in mind of David Garrick’s 1756 adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*, which he titled *Catherine and Petruchio*. The distinction would have been lost on theatre viewers, of course, but some critics have observed that Garrick’s version strips Catherine of any vestige of agency Shakespeare might have left her by taking away many of her lines, including her final recitation of a wife’s duties. The final words in the three-act Garrick version, spoken by Petruchio, are:

How shameful ‘tis when Women are so simple
To offer War where they should kneel for Peace;
Or seek for Rule, Supremacy and Sway,
Where bound to love, to honour and obey.

Although Garrick had been dead five years when *Bold Stroke* premiered and his re-telling of the shrew story was almost thirty years old, it is tempting to wonder if Cowley was responding to his treatment of the tale by arguing that Catherine was so easily tamed because she wasn’t remarkably spirited in the first place. As Victoria states later in the play, a woman knows women best.
sport; a contrivance between my maid and me: I have no spirit at all—I am as patient as poverty,” he refuses to believe her, stating, “This mask sits too ill on your features, fair lady: I have seen you without disguise” (1.2). First impressions prove impossible to reverse, so once again a heroine preserves her honor by being honest, regardless of what her auditors choose to believe.

Olivia’s juxtaposition with the famous shrew invites questions of her predecessor’s motives as well. It is intriguing to consider whether Shakespeare’s Kate, like Olivia, was merely waiting for her father to present her with a suitor she found worthwhile, protesting against the trading of women by complicating the transaction. Her recuperation at the end of the play increases her value, after all, as her father promises Petruchio more money in addition to her original dowry because he sees in her a new woman. Olivia seeks to minimize her own value and thus preserve herself for a man of her choosing. Her father describes her as “pretty, and witty, and rich—a match for a prince,” and Olivia knows that her wealth makes her much sought-after; her bad temper is not always enough to frighten away prospective husbands, and she and her maid recount some of the extraordinary measures she has had to take to ensure her continued freedom, such as affecting a passion for cats or an unsavory ancestry. In a brief soliloquy, she admits that only one thing will put an end to her termagant behavior: “Hah! my poor father, your anxieties will never end ’till you bring Don Julio.—Command me to sacrifice my petulance, my liberty to him, and Iphigenia herself, could not be more obedient” (2.2). Jeffrey N. Cox comments, “…the men in the play appear an unpromising lot...If these women seek marriage, it is marriage on their own terms, marriage grounded in the recognition of female sexuality” (368). Olivia’s pretense
gives her the right to choose her own husband, one who will satisfy her, not her father.

It is not surprising, of course, that Olivia would fight to wed a man she finds suitable, given the state of her cousin’s marriage. Cowley presents the situation artfully, first giving Victoria’s husband’s version of events. His attitude toward wedded life echoes Viller’s observation in *The Belle’s Stratagem* that marriage has a ruinous effect on relationships: “the charms that help’d to catch are generally laid by, one after another, ’till she grows a downright wife, and then runs crying to her mother, because she has transform’d her lover into a downright husband” (5.1).

Carlos explains to Julio in the opening scene that

> Carlos ...women, thou knowest, are most unreasonable beings! as soon as I had exhausted my stock of love tales, which, with management, lasted beyond the honey-moon, madam grew sullen,—I found home dull, and amused myself with the pretty peasants of the neighbourhood—Worse and worse!—we had nothing now but faintings, tears and hysterics for twenty-four honey-moons more.—So one morning I gave her in her sleep a farewell kiss, to comfort her when she should awake, and posted to Madrid; where, if it was not for the remembrance of the clog at my heel, I should bound o’er the regions of pleasure, with more spirit than a young Arabian on his mountains. (1.1)

Given his affair with Laura, it does not seem that the “clog” of his wife has impaired his spirit overmuch, but this could be his reluctant admission of guilt, which may help keep the audience from a complete hatred of him. His despair at being replaced in Laura’s affections is difficult to sympathize with, and Laura’s pragmatic assessment of the situation provides a sharp critique of the double standard applied to men and women.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) Kristina Straub suggests that the eighteenth-century theatre aided in the representation of women “as the other to
Laura informs Carlos that he is only upset at losing her because she left him before he had a chance to discard her, telling him that a man’s vanity far exceeds a woman’s. She reminds him of his own fickleness, saying, “You saw, you lik’d, you lov’d me; was there no fond trusting woman whom you deserted to indulge the transient passion? Yes, one blest with beauty, gentleness and youth; one, who more than her own being lov’d thee, who made thee rich, and whom thou mad’st thy wife” (2.1). He accuses her of getting involved with him only to avenge his wife, but she assures him their affair was conducted entirely to “indulge” herself; she seems to bring up his wife only to show him how absurd it is for him to condemn her for behavior similar to his own. She vows her love for Florio, who has replaced Carlos in her affections, and with whom she intends to enjoy the benefit of the settlement she obtained from Carlos. She tells him she is “above disguise,” and indeed she is remarkably truthful.

Up to this point, Victoria has not been named as Carlos’s wife. It is hinted at within a conversation her maid Inis has with Olivia’s maid Minette. The two are comparing the temperament of their mistresses, and Inis, ignorant of the hoax, marvels at Minette’s ability to handle Olivia’s volatility. She describes Victoria as “much too gentle,” and Minette responds, “Aye, and you see what she gets by it; had she been more spirited, perhaps her husband would not have forsaken her” (1.2). This counters Carlos’s description of his “sullen” wife, and anyone might forgive the tears and hysterics of a woman who discovers her husband has been carrying on with every other woman in the neighborhood. It also begins a discussion of how a woman should behave, which continues throughout the play.

---

masculine sexuality, the commensurate image against which masculinity is defined” (21); Cowley serves a reminder that in this equation, men did not always compare well.
Cowley nonchalantly reveals the identity of Florio in the second scene of Act 2. When Olivia asks her usually gloomy cousin why she is smiling, Victoria responds, “who could resist such a temptation to smile? a letter from Donna Laura, my husband’s mistress, stiling me her dearest Florio! her life! her soul! and complaining of a twelve hours absence, as the bitterest misfortune” (2.2). The audience is given little time to react, as Olivia, already aware of the disguise, continues the conversation with gusto, praising Victoria for her triumph and asking what “witchery” she used to steal Laura from Carlos. Victoria maintains that she did not need to consult the supernatural: “Yes, powerful witchery—the knowledge of my sex. Oh! did the men but know us, as well as we do ourselves;—but thank fate they do not, ’twould be dangerous” (2.2). The insinuation that a cross-dressed woman’s efforts to seduce a woman will meet with more success than a man’s attempt is not without precedent, of course. Some of the most recognizable examples come from Shakespeare. All six of his cross-dressed heroines assume their disguises for some combination of love and safety; the two who seem most closely related to Victoria are Julia from Two Gentlemen of Verona and Viola from Twelfth Night.34

In both plays, the women have disguised themselves as pages to travel alone safely, and they are employed by the men they love to woo other women on behalf of the men, whose efforts have been soundly rebuffed. Julia, as Sebastian, visits Silvia for Proteus, but Silvia remains faithful to Valentine and pities the unknown Julia whom Proteus has forsaken. Viola, as Cesario, woos Olivia, who is not in the least interested in Orsino, but she falls for Cesario instead.

Shakespeare seemed to enjoy the pathos and dramatic irony of two women discussing a

34 Julia as Sebastian in Two Gentlemen of Verona, Portia and Nerissa as lawyers in Merchant of Venice, Rosalind as Ganymede in As You Like It, Viola as Cesario in Twelfth Night, and Innogen as Fidele in Cymbeline. For a discussion of cross-dressing on Shakespeare’s stage, see chapter 1.
romantic situation that involves both of them, though only one of the pair is aware of the fact. The device allows for a sense of metatheatricality, an awareness of performance and disguise, that is present in almost all of Shakespeare and a significant portion of Cowley as well. In contrast to Julia’s sad encounters with Silvia, Viola’s dealings with Olivia are largely comic. Instead, it is her discussions of love with Orsino that carry moments of intense melancholy and longing. A key difference between the two situations is where the affections of the lady in question land. Silvia remains devoted to the exiled Valentine, which allows a certain degree of commiseration between her and Julia, since each is separated from her lover, either by geography or circumstance. Olivia, however, who has never been interested in Orsino, is now quite beguiled by his irreverent messenger, proving that without even trying, a woman is the better wooer of a woman.35

Cowley’s use of the cross-dressed woman as suitor departs from Shakespeare’s model in significant ways. First, she rearranges the love triangle and removes the man from the position of power. Whereas Julia and Viola are emissaries from the men they love, Victoria originates the action she takes as Florio. Although the goal of her mission is to regain the affection of her wandering husband, he is not the director of the situation, but an unhappy participant, and even a pawn. This realignment puts the wronged wife in an unusually strong position. Rather than content herself with the tears and hysterics Carlos complained of, she is asserting the knowledge she possesses as a woman, which she recognizes as being greater than a man’s and unknown to him.

---

35 Men might also be most successful with other men, as Viola effectively wins the affection of Orsino while in her male disguise; upon discovering her true identity, he is quick to announce his intention to marry her, and he persists in calling her “Cesario” until Viola resumes her female dress.
Secondly, and equally important to Cowley’s audience, Victoria is married to the man she pursues, while Julia and Viola were unwed. Cowley’s heroines are capable of employing complex disguises and schemes to secure appropriate husbands for themselves, but this highly transgressive act of seducing another woman is reserved for the most dire of circumstances; the restoration of a family justifies all. Victoria establishes her unselfish (and nonsexual) rationale for her scheme, asserting that it is distasteful to her; she does, however, admit that her first reason for donning a disguise and visiting Laura was more wounded womanly pride than a desire for revenge:

**Victoria:** The Portugueze [Laura] robbed me of [Carlos’s] heart; I concluded she had fascinations which nature had denied to me; it was impossible to visit her as a woman; I, therefore, assumed the Cavalier to study her, that I might, if possible, be to my Carlos, all he found in her...In this adventure I learnt more than I expected;—my (oh cruel!) my husband has given this woman an estate, almost all that his dissipations had left us...You, [Olivia,] who know me, can judge how I suffered in prosecuting my plan. I have thrown off the delicacy of sex; I have worn the mask of love to the destroyer of my peace—but the object is too great to be abandoned—nothing less than to save my husband from ruin, and to restore him, again a lover, to my faithful bosom. (2.2)

Her explanation to Olivia also reassures the audience of her adherence to eighteenth-century expectations of appropriate female behavior. Everything she has done has been to secure the return of her husband, first through a discovery of the charms he found so enticing in Laura, and then by a restoration of the family’s fortune. She declares that her feelings for Carlos remain
unchanged, asking the more willful Olivia, “what resentment can I shew to him I have vow’d to honour, and whom, both my duty and my heart compel me yet to love?” (2.2). Olivia decides not to argue with her, declaring, “Why, really now, I think—positively, there’s no thinking about it; ’tis among the arcana of the married life, I suppose” (2.2).

Victoria must assert both love and duty, however. As a wife, her promise to “honor and obey” still stands, and by remaining faithful to her wedding vows, she proves herself more honest and worthy of respect than her husband. Her ability to love him regardless of his behavior gives her a gracious and magnanimous spirit, qualities also requisite in a good wife. These assertions are especially important to Victoria, more so than the ultimate willingness to submit to the demands of their fathers exhibited by other Cowley heroines like Letitia, Elizabeth, Viola, and Olivia, because although the game she plays is similar to theirs, her transgression is greater and the stakes are higher. While the fortunes of the others are firm and can be wielded to give the women additional power, Victoria’s is in jeopardy, and by winning it back from Laura, she can simultaneously increase her value to Carlos.

The plot to retrieve the land from Laura involves yet another disguise, as Caesar’s valet Gasper pretends to be Victoria’s uncle and tells Laura that the land Carlos gave her was in fact his and the deed therefore worthless. Convinced, she tears it to shreds and with it, all the masks fall. Carlos arrives to challenge Florio to a duel, only to discover that his rival is in fact his wife, who has successfully saved them from ruin. She declares her love for him unchanged, and he is grateful. The reunion is somewhat ambivalent, though. Victoria delivers a saccharine plea to Laura, begging her to “awake to virtue,” and Laura’s Malvolio-like threat of revenge is almost
refreshing. Gasper too seems unconvinced by all he has seen, closing the scene with an amazed commentary on Victoria’s attitude: “Lord help ’em! how easily the women are taken in!—Here’s a wild rogue has plagu’d her heart these two years, and a whip syllabub about angels and whispers clears scores” (5.1). Gasper observes the gap between society’s expectations and nature; a wife is expected to be understanding and forgiving in the abstract, but witnessed in practice, the situation seems slightly absurd, particularly since Carlos’s reassurances are less than fervent. He claims, “I dare not yet say I love thee, ’till ten thousand acts of watchful tenderness, have prov’d how deep the sentiment’s engrav’d” (5.1). He may be recognizing that actions speak louder than words, but it is hard not to wonder if he is more grateful for the return of his fortune or of his wife.36

The Victoria and Olivia plots are brought together in the final scene. A complicated series of disguises and pretenses involving Olivia, Minette, Julio, Garcia, and Vincentio has resulted in one reveal after another. Ultimately, Olivia admits that she is not a termagant (which frightened away Garcia), that she does in fact like music (which scared off Vincentio), that she is not completely docile (which Julio despises), and that she loves Julio. Thus, when he asks her father for her hand, she is able at last to comply with Caesar’s wishes. In the middle of this resolution, Victoria and Carlos appear to share the news of their reconciliation and to impart advice to the betrothed. Carlos reverses his original stance against matrimony and encourages Julio to marry,

36 Indeed, Carlos’s feelings for his wife are difficult to discern with certainty. Gasper, in his disguise as Victoria’s uncle, paints the early days of the couple’s relationship as one fueled by passion, and it is clear that Victoria trusted him implicitly. Carlos claims to have grown bored of her, but when he encounters her, veiled, in the Prado where she and Olivia await Julio, he flirts with her and seems quite bewitched until she removes her veil and he exclaims with horror that he has been wooing his own wife. He liked her well enough when he didn’t know who she was, so it seems that he has an aversion to marriage rather than to Victoria personally. He is of course not the only man, in Cowley and elsewhere, to prefer the freedom and variety of single life.
though his counsel is not without its skeptics:

Carlos: Yes; and when you have married an angel, when that angel has done for you such things, as makes your gratitude almost equal to your love, you may then guess something of what I feel, in calling this angel mine.

Olivia: Now, I trust, Don Julio, after all this, that if I should do you the honour of my hand, you’ll treat me cruelly, be a very bad man, that I, like my exemplary cousin—

Victoria: Hold, Olivia! it is not necessary that a husband should be faulty, to make a wife’s character exemplary.—Should he be tenderly watchful of your happiness, your gratitude will give a thousand graces to your conduct; whilst the purity of your manners, and the nice honour of your life, will gain you the approbation of those, whose praise is fame.

Olivia: Pretty and matronly! thank you, my dear. We have each struck a bold stroke to-day; —your’s has been to reclaim a husband, mine to get one; but the most important is yet to be obtain’d.—The approbation of our judges.

This final exchange provides a quick primer on the appropriate behavior of both men and women. The characters remind the audience that women’s conduct cannot be the sole focus, but that men’s must be considered as well. It might be easier for a woman to behave in an exemplary fashion when a man is “tenderly watchful,” which makes both parties equally responsible for a productive, functional marriage. The message is, if society wants marriages to work, the men had better make some improvements. Early in the play, Olivia declared her intention to “set a pattern to those milky wives, whose mean compliances degrade the sex” through her pursuit of a man who pleases her and lives up to her own standards (1.2). As she observes at the end, it has been
up to her and Victoria to perform “bold strokes,” and her closing request for the judgment of the audience asks them to consider not just her actions, but the performance of society as well.

Many of Hannah Cowley’s plays address society’s and conduct books’ expectations of women. Because audiences recognized the female ideal put forth in novels such as *Pamela*, Cowley could quickly establish her heroines as similarly proper young ladies; the ready identification of the ideal permitted subtle reinventions. By presenting the ideal, Cowley helped confirm it, but by allowing her characters to engage in public displays of performance and deception, she offered an equally respectable alternative. Reading Cowley’s plays as supplements to conduct manuals highlights the close relation of the two genres and reinserts the theatre into discussions of the eighteenth-century novel and reading public.

Indeed, although conduct manuals frequently preserve a unique disdain for theatrical attendance, which would subject young ladies to all manner of public exposure and embarrassment, reading plays was no less safe. Jacqueline Pearson reports, “Respectable elite, middle- and even labouring-class women clearly did read plays,” and she cites the contents of some personal libraries as examples (n.pag.). Many conservative writers opposed the reading of books in general, and though Pearson provides evidence of a small cohort that recommended attending theatre as an educational activity, overall, “women’s reading of fiction, poetry and plays was criticized” (n.pag.).\(^\text{37}\) James Fordyce, in his popular *Sermons to Young Women* (1766),

\(^{37}\) Shakespeare was, generally, an exception to the rule. Pearson observes that novelists used characters’ knowledge of or attitude toward Shakespeare as an indicator of their taste; it was becoming a matter of national pride to claim Shakespeare as a great English writer, and the feeling of patriotism extended to women (n.pag.).
made no distinction between the dangers of reading novels and of reading plays, grouping “the common herd of Play-writers” with the novelists, neglecting to differentiate between mediums (178). Both were equally likely to “lead to a false taste of life and happiness...[to] represent vices as frailties, and frailties as virtues...[to] engender notions of love unspeakably perverting and inflammatory”; the list of complaints ends with the fear that all “female readers” will be left “with this persuasion at best, that it is their business to get husbands at any rate, and by whatever means” (178). Fordyce and the “wise parents or faithful tutors” he begs to monitor young ladies’ reading habits drew no distinction between the influence wielded by novels and plays, and his Sermons advise strenuously against them both. The disruptive effects of too much reading were explored by Charlotte Lennox in The Female Quixote and Jane Austen in Northanger Abbey, but it may be that Fordyce was more concerned with the possibility that readers would imitate heroines like Letitia and Elizabeth and find questionable means to a desired end than he was with novels and plays creating unrealistic expectations in the minds of readers.

In opposition to some conduct books’ goal of grooming polite young ladies to support a patriarchal society, Cowley displayed options for women who wanted to maintain respectability and secure happiness. On stage, they saw women like themselves who moved easily between roles, exerting power, fooling men, and getting what they wanted—all without meeting a tragic end. Cowley’s plays propose that everything in society is constructed, from the rules governing marriage contracts to the behavior of the men and women participating in them. Characters often comment that they are playing a role, which is both a nod to the theatrical event they are involved in and an acknowledgment that performance defines life. They might spend the
duration of the play looking for a way to inhabit the role they desire most; for the women, the process includes a slight adjustment of the rules that define the parameters of the role, even as the performance of the role remains unchanged—but a performance nonetheless.
The Honorable Eugenia Stanhope felt impelled to share the benefit of her experience with a relative who had recently been married. Her book, *The Deportment of a Married Life*, collected letters written to the young lady, offering advice and counsel on the topic. Her outlook is fairly conservative, and she suggests that the new bride do all she can to please her husband and conform her character to his. In the second letter, she admits that even the best wives cannot be wholly honest at all times: “I look upon the Disposition of your Husband, to be like your own, rather open to Foibles than to Faults. At least in him they are no more; for, my Dear, what in Women are Crimes; Custom, however unjustly, has made in Man but Follies. I do not approve of this Distinction, nor will you; but it is established, and you must act as if you approved it” (12). Stanhope, who has published her letters for the purpose of strengthening the institution of marriage, clearly endorses a kind of performance. She delineates the rules, objects to many of them, and rather than recommending a change, she instructs readers on how to act the part of a good wife, combining piety with performance.

Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse point out that eighteenth-century conduct books sought to construct both the kind of woman a woman ought to desire to be and the kind of woman men ought to desire (5); I would add that the confluence of these two desires could only be achieved through performance. Once the female ideal was established, it was enacted in the behavior of women who learned how to present themselves in ways that confirmed their
identities as respectable and appropriately desirable. However, and as I have discussed in previous chapters, performance was both a way in and a way out. As long as appearances conformed to the ideal, slight behavioral adjustments allowed argumentative women to disguise themselves as angelic—or vice versa. Hannah Cowley’s characters therefore retained their spotless reputations even as they manipulated men, threw tantrums, and eloped with strangers. The parameters of performance, I believe, provided some space for a third desire: that of the woman.

Literary critics and social historians have established a shift in the paradigm of marriage beginning roughly in the middle of the eighteenth century, one described by Chris Roulston in his study of marriage in English and French novels as evolving from husband and wife cast in the roles of “sovereign and subject” (respectively) to a model based on “mutuality and companionship” (15). Accompanying this change was what Ruth Perry describes as “a movement from an axis of kinship based on consanguineal ties or blood lineage to an axis based on conjugal and affinal ties of the married couple...the biologically given family into which one was born was gradually becoming secondary to the chosen family constructed by marriage.” Both Roulston and Perry identify literature as key to an understanding of such intense social change, focusing primarily on novels, though Roulston credits advice literature with presenting new ideas for appropriate marital behavior (15). This chapter extends their arguments to advice literature and the conduct of courtship, proposing that the emerging model of a companionate marriage was shaped by the performances carried out in conduct books, which, like novels and 38 Though Roulston devotes his first chapter to advice literature, he remains concerned with social definitions of marriage and domesticity and how husbands and wives interact with each other after the wedding ceremony.
theatre, instructed readers on ways to act in order to get married.

Few scholars would dispute that the rules governing marital philosophy shifted slowly and unevenly. Conduct manuals both reflected and fomented change in the late eighteenth century, engaging in what Victor Turner would call a “social drama,” which he defines as “units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations”; he delineates four stages, consisting of a “breach of regular norm-governed social relations,” a “crisis,” “redressive action ranging from personal advice...to legal machinery,” and finally “reintegration” (74-5). This discussion focuses on the final stage, the reintegration, and the adjustments made in the process. The redressive legal action can be identified as the Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753, which laid out strict rules for the process of matrimony. The law remains a subject of debate today, as it seems to have formalized and made public what may have been a less-regulated practice before 1753. Rebecca Probert has written extensively on the provenance and influence of the act, and she argues that “Legislators were not riding rough-shod over customary practices, but simply addressing the specific problem of clandestine marriages.”

Clandestine marriages were problematic because they often involved an imbalance of fortune and a wealthy young person being tricked into marriage by someone with less money and of a lower social standing. The act identified a true marriage from a false one and placed marriage (and women’s sexuality) squarely in the public sphere.

39 See Probert’s *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century: A Reassessment* for a thorough discussion of the Act’s creation and an analysis of its rhetoric, including the many loopholes it contains.

40 Earlier unions were typically performed “according to the rites of the Church of England,” which Probert shows were largely followed by the Hardwicke Act, but the act made legal requirements out of practices that might have been just traditional observations before and instituted a public and multi-step process before a marriage could occur, such as parental consent to marriages of minor children, the reading of the banns, the location of the ceremony, and registration.
Perry argues that among the emerging link between women’s sexuality and marriage that confined the former to the latter. “To marry without love (or to love without marrying) were variations on the theme of prostitution. A woman could belong to only one man and so she had better choose well the first time,” Perry explains.\footnote{See chapter 6 of Perry’s \textit{Novel Relations} for a discussion of marriage as “legal prostitution.”} “Everything else paled next to the importance of that choice, which was supposed to be made on the intangible ground of feeling rather than for any material advantage.” She points to novels as an experimental space where questions of true love and individuality could be tested—one place in which reintegration could occur.

Advice literature was another. Though it purported to be concerned with everyday life, its approach was anything but casual. Its part in the social drama was crucial, as it, to again borrow from Turner, participated in “a process of converting particular values and ends...into a system (which may be temporary or provisional) of shared or consensual meaning” (97). Conduct books worked toward a definition of marriage that acknowledged the legal dictum of the Hardwicke Act while accommodating the needs and desires of the humans that were bound by it.\footnote{Roulston makes a similar point: “...what distinguishes the later eighteenth century in terms of its cultural engagements with marriage is its sustained enquiry into the relationship between institutional imperatives and individual desires after the period of courtship. Specifically, the institution becomes defined by the individuals who inhabit it; this privileging of individual subjectivity, in turn, helps to enable the narration of marriage and to question the terms of that narration” (12). His discussion focuses on novels and married life, whereas my concern is with conduct books and courtship; our parallel observations seem to indicate that the conversation between advice literature and fiction was not one-directional and that all forms of “cultural engagement” were equally dedicated to these topics.} Since these revisions could not always be made openly, conduct books engaged in a performance similar to those being carried out on stages and in novels. According to Turner, “if daily living is a kind of theatre, social drama is a kind of metatheatre, that is, a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status-maintenance which constitutes communication
in the quotidian social process” (75-6). By explaining the roles and rules of everyday life and simultaneously commenting on them, conduct books were indeed a metatheatre for courtship and marriage. They provided scenarios that were above reproach, but they often hinted at ways women could protect and wield what little independence and power they had.

Phrases such as “conduct manuals” and “advice literature” create a category for writing as sweeping and broad as other generic terms such as “novels” and “theatre.” In fact, there is as much variety in advice literature as there is in other genres, and I would argue that in eighteenth-century England the divisions between these three genres is often negligible. As Nancy Armstrong and others have shown, the path from conduct manual to novel is clear, but I believe that a more expansive consideration reveals not just a one-way conduit from manual to novel, but instead a highly conversational relationship between theatre, novels, and conduct books. The primary topics of discussion were the female ideal, the importance of stable marriages, and the resultant success of English society as a whole.

Of course, the conduct of women was not a new topic. Kathleen Ashley has identified a link between theatre and female conduct in medieval cycle plays, arguing, “The influence of conduct literature is particularly notable in several scenes where the religious drama slights its wider function as mirror of spiritual salvation for the whole community to mirror proper social behavior for women in its audience” (24). Conduct instructions have come in many guises, from cycle plays to Shakespeare to written texts. Many of these early books seem to have identifiable and separate audiences; cookery and housewifery volumes spoke to the concerns of rural and working women, initially containing instructions on “domestic brewing and food preservation,”
but expanding in the eighteenth century to include “advice on making medicines and other remedies...dairy work and planting, and on how to run a household and manage servants” (Laurence 151). Courtesy books, meanwhile, instructed aristocratic women on life at court. By the eighteenth century, many books seem socially aspirational rather than written for a distinct class or rank.

This egalitarian position is reflected in the lack of uniformity within the genre. Conduct manuals themselves did not conform to one specific set of generic conventions; they were presented as sermons, letters, philosophical dialogues, narratives, compendia of “practical hints,” and play scripts. Sample letters and conversations were provided to guide both sexes through the delicate rigors of courtship. Passages seem to respond to or inspire scenes in plays or novels. Collections gathered advice from various sources—*The Matrimonial Preceptor* gleaned its contents from *The Rambler, The Spectator, Tatler, The Female Spectator*, Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Fordyce’s sermons, and others. Every style or source had something to say about men, women, and marriage.

As I have shown in chapter 2, women playwrights like Hannah Cowley presented heroines who, while supporting the marital hierarchies governing their futures, employed deception and authority to ensure they got the mate they wanted while their virtue remained unblemished. Even the behavior of Victoria, who in *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, dresses as a man and seduces her husband’s mistress, is excused because she only did it to restore her home. Her cousin Olivia has acted the part of a shrew to scare away suitors until her father presents a man she can love. Cowley’s plays are rich with pretense, an acknowledgement of the
performances women engage in for the sake of society and themselves. Although Cowley’s plays pushed against the uncompromising views of Fordyce and Dr. Gregory, many other conduct manuals contain more subtle directions that seem to allow for Cowley-like manipulations of propriety. Like Cowley, these books do not argue about the importance of marriage; they accept marriage as a cornerstone of a functioning society, but amid the shifting parameters of matchmaking, authors frequently eke out a bit more space for a woman’s desires while preserving her reputation.

The writers’ concerns for the ways a woman conducted herself seems genuine and intimate at times in these books. A disgraced woman, after all, was a financial liability to her family, and given the few legal employments available to women throughout most of western history, an unmarried woman had few options. Therefore, the counsel to resist flirtations and to admit a preference for a man only after he had declared his affection, which is repeated by more than one advisor, seems designed to guard a woman’s heart, body, eternal soul, and bankbook. These cautions, however, are accompanied by assertions of women’s power. As Mrs. Cockle reminds her young readers in *Important Studies for the Female Sex*, “The privilege of man is to select—that of woman to accept or reject” (112). She invites young ladies to exercise their agency and turn away a man who is displeasing, much as Mr. Hardy permits Letitia the right of refusal, even at the risk of a financial loss, in Cowley’s *The Belle’s Stratagem*. Cowley’s 1780 play predates Mrs. Cockle’s 1809 publication by nearly thirty years. Clearly, the conversation about women and marriage was ongoing (it might be argued that the subject remains unsettled today) and that no genre or medium addressed the question in isolation. The walls between
conduct manuals, theatre, and novels were permeable. Information was received, interpreted, and passed along from one to the other as women experimented with ways to properly perform propriety.

The need to perform is ever-present in the discussions of marriage. As Hannah Cowley demonstrated, a command of performance is necessary for a lasting marriage, and many conduct books lend tacit support to the theory. Ann Martin Taylor’s *Practical Hints to Young Females, on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother, and a Mistress of a Family* was in its tenth edition by 1822, and although the introduction is relatively pious and stresses the importance of being not just a wife but a good one, “which is from the Lord” (4-5), the tone shifts slightly in the first chapter, titled “Conduct to the Husband.” There is a certain wry humor in the way Taylor warns the young female about the deleterious effects of familiarity (a theme found in Cowley’s plays and Mrs. Cockle’s pages as well): “by degrees the discovery will be made that you have married a mortal, and that the object of your affection is not entirely free from the infirmities of human nature” (12-13). The remedy for this distressing situation is performance. Taylor advises her readers to carefully study their husband’s temperament and adjust their own accordingly, suggesting, “Should your husband’s temper be of the placid and gentle kind, endeavour to perpetuate it, even though your own may not naturally be of that description, and you will have a powerful incentive to imitation in observing the benign effects of such dispositions on yourself and others” (13). Performance is a means to a desired result, in and out of marriage. Taylor demands that her readers be intelligent, observant, and performative. In drawing a distinction between being a “wife, and...[being] a good wife,” Taylor notes the conscious effort required to be the latter (4).
Like all conduct manual writers, she sets out the requirements of the role and invites the reader to play.

Although it cannot be said that the books discussed in this chapter are feminist texts, many passages resist a face-value reading. The authors sometimes seem to be arguing with themselves, first presenting the established eighteenth-century mindset, and then putting a slight twist on some aspect of it. My readings remain, I hope, aware of the parameters within which these writers worked. These books are not early versions of “A Room of One’s Own” or *The Feminine Mystique*. They are heavily influenced by the religious and societal norms of their times. Acknowledging the constraints of their time and place, however, does not diminish the significance of what was starting to happen, the questions being asked, the suggestions being made. In asking their readers to perform, the writers of these books might have been doing the same—acting the part of sage and rebel simultaneously.

This chapter argues that conduct manuals participated in a three-part discussion along with novels and plays that sought to define the female ideal within the boundaries established by respectable society while suggesting ways women could manipulate the rules to their benefit. Further, the concept of performance was paramount to both the books themselves and the advice they offered. The manner in which they were written and the language they used provided an example for women to imitate in their own lives. The chapter focuses on books concerned with conduct before and after marriage; other advice literature, such as housekeeping books and fashion guides, which contributed to the construction of the female ideal in different ways, have been omitted. I have selected seven representative books, chosen for their range in date,
authorship, and style. The earliest entry was published anonymously in 1748 and seems to be almost a hybrid of a didactic novel and a conduct manual. Other books include compendia that gather material from a variety of sources, collected conversations, and straightforward catalogs of advice, ending with Mrs. Cockle’s 1809 volume. The texts span fifty years and present the work of numerous writers, some credited, some anonymous, but all seeking to guide young women along the path to marriage, and they all employ undeniable performative moves in both their own writing and in the actions they recommend.43

The Dangers of Disguise

There was concern about marriage and fortune before the Hardwicke Act, of course, and it was not confined to conduct manuals of the strictest definition. The two examples that follow reveal an uneasiness about the combination of performance and marriage, which the authors fear invites malicious deception and unhappiness. This is demonstrated by the complex 1748 work of “A Lady of Shropshire,” Love and Avarice: Or, The Fatal Effects of Preferring Wealth to Beauty. Exemplified in the History of a Young Gentleman of Fortune and Two Ladies, to both of whom he was married; to the first for Love, and to the other for her Money; and the unhappy Consequences the Knowledge of it produc’d. Although the title identifies the young man as having a fortune, the first line of the preface addresses itself to single young ladies “whose Hearts, as well as their Fortunes, are yet in their own Possession” (iii). Readers are cautioned

43 All of the primary texts in this chapter came to my attention during a visiting fellowship at Chawton House Library in Hampshire, England. I am grateful to Professor Nicole Aljoe for encouraging me to apply, Professor Elizabeth Maddock Dillon for writing a letter of recommendation hours before the deadline, my “fellow fellows,” Marion and Sally, the wonderful and kind staff at Chawton, and, of course, Toby the dog.
against giving in to the emotional excitement of love lest a wily man get the better of them and are warned that “The Happiness or Misery of the future Part of [your] Lives depends frequently on the first Step [you] make in the Dance of Love” (iii). To this author, men seem inherently untrustworthy, and she firmly places the responsibility for ensuring a happy marriage on the woman. Her greatest concern seems to be that her readers are ill-prepared for such a task; she worries that they might have “too much Credulity” (v). Her harshest criticism is reserved for the men, whom she accuses of being filled with “Avarice and Subtlety” (v). She seems to position her text as one of education, which young ladies should consult in order to learn what to avoid as they enter society.

The author is aware of matters of genre as she introduces her book by explaining her inspiration for the text and why she chose to tell it the way she did:

A History, indeed, it should be called, because the persons therein mention’d are real, and the Facts related true, as can be testified by a Multitude of Witnesses who live in the Neighborhood of the Scene of Action. But I have given it the Air of a Novel, the better to conceal from the Notice of the World, the real Actors in this Tragedy, who are Persons of considerable Note in the Country where they live. (v)

In this brief discussion, she draws on real-life actors, evoking both history and theatre, and settles on the narrative form of a novel to tell her instructive tale. She takes inspiration from other genres and explains the reasons behind her final choice. But this acknowledgement almost eliminates the distinction between the genres; although she has decided that the novel allows her to relate her story in the best way, her reliance on the drama of everyday life admits that the lines
dividing genre were porous and amorphous.

While the Lady of Shropshire sought to warn young women about the treacheries of fortune-hunting men, Edward Ward attacks the opposite problem in his bitterly titled *Female Policy Detected: Or, The Arts Of a Designing Woman Laid Open. By E.W. Author of the London Spy, and Trip to Jamaica. Treating, I. Of Her Allurements, Inconstancy, Love, Revenge, Pride and Ingratitude...To which is added, a poetical Discription of a Widow, Wife and Maid*, published in 1764. Both the author of *Love and Avarice* and Ward admit to a distrust of appearances, the lady author concerned that her innocent readers would be taken in by persuasive men, and Ward sneering at the duplicities of fashion and make-up. As the Lady addressed her book to young ladies, so does Ward dedicate his to the apprentices of London, echoing her warning that a misstep early in amorous encounters could lead to doom thereafter, making a young man unfit to be a husband; he promises to tell his readers how to “know these Vultures in Peacocks Plumes” (n. pag.).

Both of these books betray an anxiety about performance and the possibility that people might not be who they claim to be. The solution for both men and women is virtue. Ward advises his readers, “Chuse for your wife a prudent woman; for prudence preserves virtue, virtue love, and love constancy” (14). It is somewhat surprising that Ward admits the existence of a prudent woman, for he has very few kind words for the sex on the whole. None of them are to be trusted, and men should not admit love for one, lest his feelings be used against him; he can measure the

---

44 Interestingly, both books also describe encounters with the opposite sex in terms of battle or warfare. *Love and Avarice* warns that “Passion keeps no Guard, but exposes her Charge to all the Approaches and Assaults of the Enemy” (iii), while Ward’s dedication describes his book as “Armour to defend you from the Darts thrown by a wanton and designing Woman” (n. pag.). These authors seem concerned with encouraging marriages founded on mutual virtue rather than the affection and esteem recommended by later supporters of a companionate union.
depth of a woman’s love for him by the strength of her jealousy (13). In short order, Ward warns his readers not to be “over credulous” of the virtue of the women they love (13), and then advises, “Be constant to your Wife, that she may be constant to you; for Gratitude may constrain a Woman to preserve those Bonds, which Revenge make her violate” (14). Although the vast majority of Ward’s vitriol is directed at women, he does not wholeheartedly endorse men either, advising that men should not trust their wives with other men, because “opportunity” might overcome “virtue” (14). In all, Ward paints a bleak picture of both sexes, one tainted with distrust and inconstancy.

Here, women are depicted as performers in a treacherous sense. Ward wants his male readers to be careful not to be fooled by a woman’s appearance. This suspicion, which was neither universal nor eradicated as the century went on, might have actually contributed to women’s successful acts. If a woman is assumed to be performing, all that is really left is for her to select the part she wants to play; in essence, she can exploit mistrust to her advantage and perform the role that suits her best. Although Ward is much more ominous and distrustful than most women would wish, and although many of his particulars seems far-fetched—how many women remain faithful merely out of gratitude?—he does address a puzzle that is reflected in other literature of the day: how to distinguish between appearance and reality. As the middling classes increasingly imitated their betters, conduct became more important and harder to read. Ward, exasperated, just wants women to stop acting, not realizing that they had to act in order to be women.
The Performance of Educated Decisions

In 1765, a third edition was published of *The Matrimonial Preceptor: A Collection of Examples and Precepts Relating to the Married State From The Most Celebrated Writers Ancient and Modern*. Its sixty-three chapters were taken from various sources, including *The Adventurer*, *Spectator*, *Rambler*, *Tatler*, *Guardian*, *Female Spectator*, “[Henry Fielding’s] *Tom Jones* and others,” “[Samuel Richardson’s] *Clarissa* and others,” and Plutarch. The chapters are largely concerned with the formation and sustenance of a happy marriage, with directives for both sexes; unlike Ward, the authors seem to hold both men and women equally responsible for marital success. Many entries tacitly acknowledge the necessity of performance, and they also address questions of female education and agency.

Quite a few writers caution against hasty or imprudent matches, indicating that the parties involved were encouraged to take part in the arrangements and actively choose a mate most suitable to them; such advice also steers young people away from clandestine marriages and toward matches that were publicly approved. Other chapters praise the virtues of the married state as opposed to the misery of being “kept; condemn the female gamester” and the “coxcomb”; and explain the brutality of men and the clash of temperaments. The collection’s aim is to impress upon its readers the importance of marriage as a bulwark of society and its benefits to the individual participants, as well as delineate rules for successfully operating within it. The creation of marriage had become a matter of public concern, and its sustenance could not be neglected.

The third chapter, whose source is unattributed, provides counsel to ladies on “the choice
of husband.” It offers itself as a corrective to “comedies and novels” that might have offered bad advice, particularly regarding the maxim that “the best husband is a reformed rake” (12). By its own admission, this conduct book is entering into a conversation with theatre and novels, treating them as equally serious and influential arbiters of women’s taste and actions, irrespective of medium or purpose. The author seems to draw no distinction between the entertainment of “comedies and novels” and the openly instructive goal of conduct manuals, perhaps understanding that in many ways, they did indeed share a common mission: to shape the female ideal, or something that looked like it.

The chapter does not strive to tell women how to conduct themselves, but how to decipher the character of men.45 This approach assumes a certain amount of power on the side of the woman—if she is being advised on which type of man is the most appropriate for a husband, there is a tacit acknowledgement that she does indeed have the ability to make a choice. Further, the woman is not being asked to perform, but to recognize performance in others. In this scenario, the man is the object of the woman’s gaze as she assesses his performance. The writer suggests, as tactfully as possible, that a woman need not marry a man of “good sense,” but instead a man with a “Good Nature” (14). This writer is also wary of deceptive performances that suitors engage in, warning readers that “it is extremely difficult to detect malevolence amidst the assiduities of courtship, and to distinguish the man under that almost inscrutable disguise the lover” (17). Good nature, the writer is pleased to report, is always candid and easy to identify.

45 The writer dedicates himself only to “[preserving] innocence by deflecting error,” and he states frankly that “those who violate a known truth, deserve the infelicity they incur”; he is speaking specifically of marriages of great inequality of “age and condition” (12). Indeed, marriages between parties of disparate age seem to be a concern for many writers of conduct manuals, theatre (such as Hannah Cowley’s School for Greybeards, discussed in chapter 2, and novels (including Sense and Sensibility, the subject of chapter 4).
The next chapter, taken from *The Adventurer*, seems to allow for some small performances on the part of the lady as it instructs women on conduct towards a husband. It cautions readers that love requires maintenance and reminds them that “whatever would have been concealed as a defect from the lover, must with yet greater diligence be concealed from the husband” (22-3). Throughout both courtship and marriage, the woman’s role is not conceived here as a passive one. She is asked to be actively studying the behavior of the men she encounters, discerning the true from the false, weighing the merits of all comers and making an informed decision. Love, though a consideration, seems to be more of a possibility at the courtship stage and something that results from esteem and regard rather than something to base one’s choice upon. To the woman, too, goes a sizable portion of the responsibility of keeping a marriage happy after the wedding, and this author is neither the first nor the last to suggest that small secrets are key to success.

A later chapter, titled “The duties of a good wife,” advises deception in even plainer terms. It is worth quoting the detailed instructions at length:

[A woman] should study [her husband’s] character, taste, and defects, and conform to his will in all reasonable things. If she should be under a necessity of thinking and acting different from him, let her not too violently oppose his inclination, but seem at first to fall in with his sentiments, and then mildly demonstrate to him that his resolutions are liable to some inconveniencies [sic], giving at the same time a few hints of other means to satisfy them: in short, let her, if possible, make him fix on those very means, that he may

---

46 The source is listed as “Clarissa and others,” but there is no explanation of who the “others” are, and the text does not indicate which portions are taken from *Clarissa* and which belong to the mysterious “others.”
The paragraph seems unremarkable at first, advising a woman to like what her husband likes might be expected from a society that allowed women few rights. But by the second sentence, a small revolution seems to be percolating. The wife is not advised to just agree with her husband—instead, she receives instructions on how to manipulate him into agreeing with her while persuading him to think that his new point of view is what he thought all along (a technique illustrated by Hannah Cowley more than once). Although the remaining pages of the chapter glorify the good wife and establish her importance to a stable home and society, the recommended subterfuge of the first paragraph reassures female readers that their intelligence and spirit are not being underestimated. The author praises wives who are not “stupidly silent” and are instead possessed of minds “enriched with all useful knowledge” and have “a taste for polite literature” (217).

Indeed, after concluding his description of the cheery home a woman should create so that her husband prefers it to the “society of men,” the author complains that for most young ladies, the goal is matrimony and they give no thought to what happens after the ceremony. He doesn’t blame the women so much as the way they are raised and educated:

Whoever will attend to the modern female education, will perceive that almost the whole of it consists in a few trifling accomplishments...which usually grow out of character after marriage. And can we wonder then, that after the charms of youth are worn off, and all those little accomplishments are become improper, they appear not only in the eyes of their husbands, but of every body, such unamiable creatures, destitute of
every attainment that might recommend them? (217-18)

The chapter ends on this rebuke and offers no further remedy. The author has spent the majority of the pages delineating the domestic female ideal, but the chapter opens and closes with mildly radical ideas. The first paragraph endorses deception and manipulation, and the final sentences bewail the ineffectual education young girls are given.

These few pages perfectly encapsulate the emerging attempt to reconcile a domestic homemaker with the model of a companionate marriage, as well as the performances demanded by both. The woman described in the chapter meets all of the requirements of a help-mate, comforter, and encourager, but she is also endowed with a quick mind and is able to converse intelligently with her husband (and occasionally to get the better of him). The character portrait that emerges here seems to follow in the tradition of Shakespeare’s witty women, such as Rosalind and Beatrice, and to foreshadow Hannah Cowley’s clever heroines like Letitia Hardy and Elizabeth Doiley. Similar to her theatrical counterparts, the woman in this chapter must be a skilled performer, able to play the part of the housewife and know when to let her intelligence show and when to use it more subtly.

Many of the articles collected in The Matrimonial Preceptor address marriage as both a social and political issue. For example, “On Marriage and Divorce” strives to answer questions about relationships between men and women by speaking to men. Admitting first that “Men cannot live so happily without women as with them,” the writer continues, “but how, and on

47 For a discussion of Shakespeare’s women, see chapter 1. Letitia Hardy, of The Belle’s Stratagem, and Elizabeth Doiley, of Who’s the Dupe?, are discussed in chapter 2.
48 Like all chapters in the book, the author is unattributed (except Fordyce, who had the good sense to put his name in the title of his work). This piece appeared originally in a publication noted as “Brit. Mus.” I have been unable to identify the source.
what terms? Whether in or out of matrimony, is the question?” and explains that what follows will be an examination of the topic “as it relates to pleasure, honesty, and public good” (166). The chapter speaks to men specifically, discussing the conveniences and inconveniences of keeping a mistress versus marrying. The author does not mention the morality of women—the concerned only about them is how they relate to men. The most unappealing aspect of marriage, the writer points out, “is being obliged to live with one man or woman till death parts, though they hate and despise one another heartily” (167). The solution: make divorces easier and less expensive (167). Mutual consent is a requirement, and the writer adds that more divorces would put an end to the “wretched” state of old bachelors, presumably by making more women available for (re)marriage. Ultimately, the author decides in favor of marriage over casual sex with women who form no emotional attachment or the middle ground of keeping a faithful mistress. Marriage, the chapter concludes, is better for society and for children, and more marriages will help put a stop to prostitution and mistress-keeping.

The brief treatise puts at least as much responsibility for maintaining the social order through marriage on men as it does women. Perhaps oddly, part of its support for the institution rests in an advocacy for its convenient dissolution through divorce. Although the author acknowledges the importance of marriage and well-cared-for children, he or she seems to be looking for ways to make it more palatable to the commitment-phobe. In this scenario, neither men nor women are disgraced by the process. This negotiation with the definition and confines of marriage demonstrates an awareness of society both large and small: The author notes the injustice of requiring partners who “hate and despise one another heartily” to stay together until
death mercifully separates them, while he also admits the benefits of monogamy—safety from
venereal disease, no bastard children, and fewer expenses that a profligate lifestyle demands.
Although these concessions might seem rather cynical and almost satirical when summarized
(e.g., get married because you won’t get the clap and hey, you can always get divorced if you’re
miserable), there is no evidence in the other chapters of this 309-page book, which devotes its
final pages to advertisements for *The Whole Duty of Prayer* and *True Christian Morals*, that
marriage is a topic taken lightly. Even a chapter on the brutality of husbands, credited to a
publication titled *Humourist*, exhorts men to be more agreeable to their wives.\(^{49}\) It seems that the
author is appealing to a specific audience and laying out a case that will resonate with them.

Indeed, another chapter, taken from *Museum*, which might be related in some way to
*Brit. Mus.*, counsels men very carefully on the choice of a wife, a step it proclaims “the most
important” (211). Readers are warned to use “reason,” but not to exclude love or affection
completely; “I would have this tenderness arise from reflection and not from accident” (212).
The writer admits some difficulty in discerning a woman’s true character, as a young woman
from a good family “appears what she ought to be; and therefore to know what she really is, is an
affair that requires time and attention” (212-13). This fear of performance and disguise is
remedied by a study of her parents’ character, and more crucially, her education. The author
scoffs at the traditional education of young girls:

> To read, to write, to sing, to dance, and to work a little with the needle, is the common

road of female education. What wonder then that a person thus brought up, should be so

\(^{49}\) As the title of the publication, *Humourist*, suggests, the type of brutality under discussion is not extreme or
physical. Rather, the author seems to address the problem of declining interest, advising husbands to maintain the
courtesies they paid their wives when they were courting.
unfit for the conversation of a man of sense, for the partner of his joys and cares, or to share with him in the government of his family? (223)

While it might not be entirely pleasant to think of the goal of women’s education as suiting her for the company of men, it is hard to ignore words and phrases like “partner” and “share with him the government.” The writer clearly supports a companionate marriage (later in the chapter, he criticizes matches arranged by parents, particularly those based on monetary gain); there is no mention of husbands who command and wives who submit.50

What makes The Matrimonial Preceptor particularly fascinating is the accuracy with which it seems to reflect the concerns and conversations of mid-eighteenth century English society. Although literary critics are frequently reminded by historians not to mistake fiction for fact, it seems reasonable to assume that the arguments within the preceptor were also taking place beyond its pages—the articles collected therein are no more in agreement than any other form of expression recorded during the time. While I have highlighted passages that demonstrate an awareness of performance (and varying degrees of comfort with it) and an advocacy for female education, other chapters are less progressive. In fact, the chapter discussed above, “Matrimony the most important step a man can take in private life,” is followed by “Characters of good and bad wives,” attributed to Fordyce, which opens with an anonymous rhyme:

Be frugal ye wives, live in silence and love;

50 What young girls should be taught is a topic that recurs often in eighteenth-century literature. Hannah Cowley ridicules a fine lady’s “accomplishments” in The Belle's Stratagem and the higher education of men in Who's the Dupe?, where both the scholar and the experienced merchant are outsmarted by the heroine. Jane Austen addresses the pleasures and perils of reading in many of her novels. Charlotte Lennox presents a complex character study in The Female Quixote, which Sharon Smith Palo examines alongside contemporary education discussions in her excellent article, “The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study: Romance and Women’s Learning in Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote.” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 18.2 (2006): 203-228.
This learn from the keys, and the lips, and dove:

And learn from the tortoise, who ne’er quits her shell,

That wives should at home be contented to dwell. (225)

This is followed by brief character sketches detailing the chaos that ensues when a woman pursues activities outside the home (her specific acts are not enumerated) and the happiness that results when women behave more like Angelica, who is “steady in her temper, and chaste in her pleasures...Her husband finds her always the same, unruffled by his passions, pliable to his humours, open and obliging to his friends, but rather reserved to others” (226). The meek creature described in this chapter contrasts sharply with other writers’ preference for women able to share governance. The end is the same—a stable home that supports society—but the means are vastly different. The chapters within the compendium seem to reflect the rampant confusion about the role women should perform in marriage. Should she submit always to her husband’s will? Or have a share of the power? Or, thanks to performance, do both?

The writers collected in this book do seem to agree on what makes a bad marriage: haste and mercenary motives. Multiple chapters point out the “folly” of fortune-hunting and precipitous unions. The first edition of the book was published in 1755, and from working with the third edition, it is unclear if any changes were made to the selections, and when the selections themselves were originally published. It is possible that some writers were cautioning against

---

51 With married life described as so quiet and predictable, it is easy to understand the provenance of another eighteenth-century concern about marriage: that it was boring. Many of Hannah Cowley’s plays debate the question, as do some of Elizabeth Inchbald’s; Chris Roulston’s book, *Narrating Marriage*, examines the portrayal of life after the wedding in novels. As we have seen, other entries in *The Matrimonial Preceptor* seem to address the problem by suggesting men marry intelligent, well-educated women with whom they can have lively conversations, rather than silently agreeable angels.
clandestine marriages before the Hardwicke Act made them more difficult to procure, or were rallying support for the law by reminding readers of the dangers of haste and secrecy. A selection from *The Female Spectator*, for example, begins by praising the social value of marriage, but devotes most attention to mistakes made by reckless choices, among them haste, a large gap in age, station, or “humours,” and a desire for wealth (188). The writer also cautions against clandestine agreements and condemns all these unwise marriages strongly, saying that “dirges” should be played at the ceremony and the couple’s “friends should pity not congratulate their lot” (188).

A social refinement of the understanding of marriage seems to run parallel to the legal adjustments. It was a topic of debate within novels, plays, and advice literature (as well as other forms of writing) throughout the eighteenth century, and the conversation circulated freely between genre and medium. Inevitably, the question came back to women, their education, and how they should best perform as wives. At the time, the education given to men and women was unequal, regardless of class. “In 1760 few people, with the exception of elite men, received consistent formal schooling as children, girls were virtually never as well educated as boys of their own class, and universities were closed to women” (Steinbach 162). Clearly, the audience of the conduct books was expected to be literate and at the very least, members of the emerging middle class. Girls were usually taught by their mothers, governesses, and perhaps their brother’s tutor if he had time. It was generally thought more important for a young lady to know how to enter a room than to understand the parliamentary system. Passages such as those quoted above, however, and even Cowley’s quick-witted heroines, indicate that concern over female education
was not limited to philosophical pamphlets or agitators for sweeping social reform; popular writing was drawing a connection between education and marriage, seeming to say that the success of the latter might require improvements to the former.

The writers of the books and periodicals that provided material for *The Matrimonial Preceptor* had a vested interest in supporting a well-educated public; if the number of literate women increased, so too did potential sales. Also, the purpose of conduct books was to educate. Perhaps writers recognized that a successful dissemination of the ideal depended on women’s ability to receive the information and understand it.

**The Scripts of Love**

In 1792, the anonymous writers of *The Science of Love* follow an instructive model. The book borrows from multiple genres to instruct its readers in the performance of courtship by giving them letters and sample conversations written as plays. The authors begin by addressing a lapse in knowledge and setting out a solution: Although the passion of love was universal, they declare, many people had contrived to misunderstand its principles and were unhappy, but this slender volume would set all to rights (i). The authors carefully position the love they discuss within the sanctity of marriage. They encourage the reader to abandon carnal thoughts, declaring that “The passion of love is egregiously mistaken by the generality of mankind; for they imagine it to consist in the gratification of sensual appetite; whereas, in reality, the pleasure of the senses is but a secondary object with the real lover” (i-ii). What follows can be read as a working

52 Full title: *The Science of Love or The whole art of Courtship Made familiar to every Capacity. Containing Love-letters, Pleasing conversations, Poems & Songs. To which is added An Appendix Instructing persons of both Sexes In the Choice of a Companion for Life.*
definition of the companionate marriage: “A concordance of sentiment, a mutuality of sensation, an excentric [sic] enjoyment of the pleasures of the beloved object and feeling of his or her pains, with a sensibility equally exquisite, constitutes the character of this most celestial of all our impulses” (ii). Men and women, in this definition, are equal—the writers even use “his or her” rather than the universal “his.” Both sexes, the writers assert, are powerless under the dominion of love (ii).

The book thus addresses lovers in general, regardless of sex. Every lover is described as “modest” and “timorous” (iii). As the title suggests, the contents of the book are designed to help familiarize lovers with the protocol of courtship. Letters are provided, “from which the person enamoured may easily draw a picture of his feelings,” and then a series of conversations “such as may happen between two lovers in all the stages of the passion” (iii). There is also “a great variety of short histories of lovers” and poems and plays on the same subject (iii). An appendix offers pointed advice on choosing a mate, “which, if punctually followed, cannot fail of securing uninterrupted contentment and satisfaction to both parties” (iv).

*The Science of Love* is at once epistle, script, narrative, and guide. It provides letters they can copy and conversations written as tiny plays as inspiration. There are no lessons on how to write a persuasive letter to a young lady with whom the reader might have fallen in love at first sight, but there is a letter suitable to such an occasion, which the gentleman might copy over and send to the lady in question, allowing him to participate in a Cyrano-like performance of love. While there is no way to ascertain whether the book was ever actually used in this manner, the possibility suffices. Rather than offer step-by-step instructions, *The Science of Love* performs the
end result, whether it be a letter or a conversation, and invites readers to enter into the performance as well, enacting the examples as actors give life to scripts.

The letters, although they do not relate a progressive narrative in the same way that epistolary novels do, present mini-stories (what we might call flash fiction today) and contain insight into the kinds of situations young lovers might expect to encounter when courting, or at least what their elders feared they would. Some letters seem specific to an extraordinary degree, such as: “From a Youth aged Sixteen, going to an Academy in France, to a Young Lady of Fourteen at Boarding School,” “From a Gentleman of large Fortune to the Daughter of a Curate, whom he wishes to debauch on Pretence [sic] of Love and Marriage,” “From a Sailor just arrived in the Downs, from a long Voyage, to his Mistress at Wapping,” and “From a Gentleman of Fifty-two, who possesses an Independent Fortune, to a beautiful Girl of Fifteen, who has no Fortune.” Even admitting the possibility that not all of these letters were meant to be taken with complete seriousness, every preposterous letter of proposition is followed by a dignified refusal, so it is conceivable that the extreme examples were included not to aid gentlemen of all ages in their quest to debauch innocent maidens, but to help the young ladies recognize deceitful language and respond appropriately. Many of the letters betray a concern about unequal social and financial positions, such as the wealthy men seeking out impoverished mistresses and gentleman of no fortune writing to ladies above their station. No amount of performance, the letters seem to confess, can disguise a disparity in class and rank. It is doubtful that these letters are really meant to instruct working class men and women on how to conduct a relationship with members of the gentry; given the disparity in education, literacy was still a privilege. The farm-
girl of the letters was unlikely to have the ability, income, or time to indulge in conduct books. These books depicted an ideal in more ways than one. Society itself was idealized, not just the women in it. The letters taught every female reader, even if she’d never been near a farm, how to recognize nefarious intentions and how to rebuff them.

By upholding social strata, advice literature followed the pattern of eighteenth-century education overall, which Susie Steinbach describes as “organized to support class hierarchies” (162). Members of different classes were never educated together, and Steinbach observes that the curriculum offered to women reflected the lives they were expected to live as adults, “as when aristocratic girls learned to sketch...[and] when working-class girls were taught skills thought to be needed by both domestic servants and working-class wives” (162). Although money and trade was increasingly allowing men some degree of mobility, the education system (or lack thereof) did not. The daughters of successful merchants, whose father’s money could buy them literacy, consulted conduct books to learn how to act the part of a lady.

Some of the letters include multiple exchanges between the same couple, fashioning a brief story as they negotiate the terms of their courtship. It is not always clear when the instruction leaves off and the story-telling begins. The “Conversations between Lovers” section blurs the generic lines still further by presenting miniature play-scripts of selected scenarios. The speakers do not have names, just “Gentleman” and “Lady,” so like the letters, there is no attempt to craft a narrative, but the brief introduction to each vignette specifies whether the characters are the same as before or not; the “Gentleman” and “Lady” make multiple appearances. Like many of the letters, the plays seem content to combine realistic concerns for virtue and propriety with a
disregard for realism. The first conversation, for example, is established as a first meeting between the Gentleman and the Lady, yet four brief pages later, the pair seems only to require the blessing of her father before becoming formally engaged. It seems unlikely that, first, a respectable woman would walk alone in St. James’s Park, that she would, second, encourage a conversation with a man she does not know, and that, third, she would conclude by permitting him to call upon her father with the understanding that she looks favorably upon his prospects. But the scene is not without its appeal. The pair engage in a little badinage that, while surely not up to the standards of Cowley or Sheridan, portrays the lady as a less-than-docile figure. She taunts the gentleman and effectively asks him if she looks like the kind of woman who goes around picking up men in parks, accusing him of wanting to turn her into a “devil” who does (57). He responds, with admirable and amusing honesty, “Could I, in your person, dress, or demeanour, find sufficient indication, by which such an end were attainable, I frankly confess, that I would embrace the favorable opportunity; but, in every thing about you, I see the character of virtue,” and so he seems to resign himself to achieving her by honorable means (58).

This simple scene echoes concerns about appearance and status found in the theatre it seems to imitate. Many of Cowley’s plays, as discussed in the previous chapter, center on disguise and deception; in *Who’s the Dupe?* (1779), Sandford expresses dismay at his inability to distinguish ladies of quality from dance-hall girls. Here, the Lady questions the Gentleman’s willingness to admire her despite his ignorance of her “birth, education, fortune, and connections” (58). She doubts his ability to assess her character and suitability for marriage by her outward presentation alone. He insists that birth is unimportant and that she has proven her
good education by her conversation thus far; he does not acknowledge that if she is well-educated, she must be of good birth, as it was nearly impossible for the laboring classes to attain the same level of education as the middle or upper classes. He also claims that fortune is irrelevant and that he has connections enough of his own and is not in need of hers. All he asks her to be is “virtuous, sweet-tempered, and judicious” (58). By dismissing the importance of rank and wealth and virtually proposing marriage to a stranger in the park, the Gentleman is negotiating the evolving boundaries of respectable behavior. Just as actors on stages provided models of etiquette experimentation, so too do the scenes in *The Science of Love* indulge in a kind of societal improvisation. What might happen, the authors seem to ask, if a gentleman met a lady in a park and told her she looked like an angel he’d dreamt of the night before? Scandal, disgrace, and ruin? Or a marriage founded on mutual respect and esteem?

**A Quixotic Mentor**

*The Female Mentor, or Select Conversations* (1793) seems to have little room for such ambiguity. A brief dedication professes the writer’s desire to remain anonymous to all but her patron, and she states that the main purpose of the conversations is “to lead the youthful and unbiassed mind in the ways of virtue” (iii-iv). She has, however, chosen a curious genre for her endeavor, which she addresses in the introduction. The writer, “Honoria,” claims to be an editor only—it is her mother Amanda who is the “Female Mentor” of the title and who brought up Honoria and her “numerous” siblings in the ways of truth and virtue by assigning readings and conducting discussions thereof (vii). Honoria makes it clear that the readings “inculcated a
lesson,” although she admits that the stories were “calculated to engage our attention” (vii). She justifies her own publication by reporting that their cozy family conversations gradually expanded to include neighbor children and that the group continued even as the members became adults, so that now their assemblies were quite well-known and many people were clamoring to join. Since an influx of new members would make the group too large, Honoria decided to compile some of the conversations into a book so that any interested party could benefit from the wisdom dispensed at the meetings.

Like many eighteenth-century women authors, the anonymous Honoria apologizes for the public display of her work, even if it is “intended to promote the cause of RELIGION and VIRTUE” (x). Her excuses are highly performative, because they do not erase her entry into the public sphere of print, however anonymous it might be. By the act of publishing a book and rationalizing it on ground of religion and virtue, she is already demonstrating to her readers how to say one thing and do another while maintaining respectability all the while. She is no innocent —she knows that if anyone is to learn from her book, it, like the stories she read as a child, must engage a reader’s attention. She mentions in the dedication a hope that the collection will offer her patron “some amusement” (iii). She betrays an understanding of the contradictions facing published female authors who also wanted to remain respectably silent, and the frame she constructs protects her. She is not a writer, merely a recorder of events that transpired when a respectable woman conducted improving discussions safely ensconced within her home; she publishes the book not to satisfy her own ambition, but to help others; and although she strives to amuse and entertain her readers, her primary desire is to educate them. The entire book,
therefore, is a performance and a manipulation of the very rules Honoria and Amanda profess to uphold.

The chapters themselves vary. Some state their subject, such as “On the Influence of Education” or “Anger,” and others are biographical, like “Sketch of the Life of Fenelon” and “On the Queen Consorts of England.” Most of them are indeed conversations, though one speaker tends to dominate and there is a singular lack of repartee. The result is chapters that sometimes read more like novels than conduct manuals that contain one voice making pronouncements. The overall tone, of course, remains didactic, and there is no attempt to paint the personalities of the characters partaking in the conversations. Even Amanda, the kindly mentor, remains at a distance, despite her professed concern for the well-being of the young ladies listening to (or reading) her words.

Given Amanda’s aversion to novels, this decidedly non-novelistic approach is understandable. A chapter is devoted to Amanda’s opinion on and explanation of the dangers of novel-reading. Her concerns echo that of many conduct book writers: she fears that the unrealistic heroes young ladies encounter in novels will distort their expectations so thoroughly that they will either endow every ordinary man with an exaggeration of qualities he does not in fact possess, or be so disappointed that no one lives up to their standards that they will turn down all comers and end old maids. She gives an example of a friend of hers who was so misled by Richardson’s *Charles Grandison* that she rejected several offers of marriage and did not give up “these romantic notions, till it was too late” (116).

None of this is surprising, given the contemporary debate about the propriety of novels,
but Amanda’s apparent fear that young women are unable to differentiate truth from make-believe is followed immediately by advice to engage in a fiction of their own: “Women are to conceal their feelings, although they like any of the other sex, or they will appear bold, and become objects of ridicule; and a lady of delicacy would rather die, than first disclose her partiality” (116). Again, her position is not uncommon among advice writers—I have encountered none who suggest a woman proclaim her love for the man of her choice to any and all who will listen—but the proximity of Amanda’s concern for impressionable young ladies and her exhortation that they assume a mask is striking. The connection, for her, is protection. She stresses how different situations could wreak havoc on hearts and reputations, and she is probably correct. The rules for courtship, even almost thirty years after the cautions of *The Matrimonial Preceptor*, were still undergoing negotiation, and in society at large, women were still relatively powerless. It behooved women to be the ones in charge of creating the fiction that was most advantageous to them, and Amanda does not want their heads crowded with other people’s inventions. Nonetheless, her somewhat contradictory advice follows in the overall path Honoria established for the work as a whole in the very first pages of the volume.

Amanda suggests that histories make for good reading, and she advises that young ladies keep “their minds properly occupied, [so] they will be in less danger of forming a romantic attachment” (116-17). If pressed, though, Amanda admits she would recommend one novel: Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*. She explains that the heroine (Arabella) has formed dangerous ideas about love, romance, and chivalry due to her reading material, but thankfully “had the good fortune to be cured of her distemper, to become a rational being, and to renounce
the perusal of those publications which led her astray” (118). In this summary, Arabella’s reading is like a virus that has infected her, causing an illness from which she must be cured. Interestingly, Amanda does not say that Arabella is restored to rationality, but that she *becomes* a rational being. Arabella’s reading seems to have corrupted her so completely that she is barely recognizable as a woman, despite her exemplary modesty and distrust of men. Amanda thus shields her young pupils from books that would poison them and threaten their place in society.

However, Amanda’s approval of *The Female Quixote* might be more complex. Although the novel can be cast as a cautionary tale that demonstrates the dangers of excessive reading, this lesson is only imparted in the final few pages. The majority of the story is very funny, and it features a heroine who is independently wealthy, beautiful, strong-willed, and intelligent. She is contrasted favorably with her fashionable cousin Miss Glanville, who is silly and ineffectual. She is praised by Sir Charles, her uncle, who “express’d much Admiration of her Wit, telling her, if she had been a Man, she would have made a great Figure in parliament, and that her Speeches might have come perhaps to be printed in time” (Lennox). Despite her oddities, she is pursued by more than one man and is befriended by a respectable society doyenne. Arabella embodies the contradictions displayed in *The Female Mentor* itself—now, in addition to all the earlier assertions and apologies, Amanda suggests that her audience cure themselves of a desire to read novels by reading a novel.

Thus *The Female Mentor* follows the example set by other advice literature, the theatre, and novels such as *The Female Quixote*, wherein women are told to be respectable but shown how to rebel. Performance reconciles the dichotomy by labeling the behavioral aberrations as
unfortunate but necessary and by calling the unorthodox actions the performance, when in fact it might be the propriety that is the disguise.

**The Role of “Wife”**

While Honoria and Amanda cover a range of topics, as do many other books, some focus on the married state after the ceremony, indicating that the need for performance did not diminish once the vows were exchanged. The second edition of Eugenia Stanhope’s advice on relationships past the courting stage was published in 1798: *The Deportment of a Married Life: Laid Down in a Series of Letters, Written by the Honourable E---- S----, a Few Years Since, to a Young Lady, her Relation, then Lately Married*. Stanhope’s first two letters address the disposition of a wife and of a husband, and her recommendations do not contrast sharply with other writers’ counsel. It is the woman’s duty to create a home that her husband will find comfortable and more attractive than drinking parties, and she is expected to “[conform] herself to the Sentiments of her Husband” in order to achieve domestic happiness (2). But in the chapter on the disposition of a husband, which is still directed to Stanhope’s young female relation, the new wife is given subtle instruction for, in effect, deceiving and manipulating her husband.

Stanhope tells her reader to make “herself and her House agreeable in a Degree superior to that to which those Scenes [of debauchery] can pretend” in order to convince her husband to stop drinking (16). She points out that “railing at the Fault” will be a waste of time (16). She provides a lengthy explanation of the reasons for men’s “Obstinacy”:

They cannot bear to be led by a Woman to any Thing. They have a settled Opinion of us,
as Inferior in Natural Authority and in Understanding; and it will have an Appearance of meanness to themselves, to be guided by those whom they should direct; or to be governed by those whom they should command. Endeavour not to get the better of this Opinion: I believe it is justly founded; but, if it was not, ‘tis not your Business to reform the World. (17)

Although she claims to agree with men’s perception of women’s inferiority, she does so after suggesting that her reader can outsmart her husband and trick him into giving up drinking. Again, she exhibits a performative contradiction between words and action. The wife in question should then assume the demeanor of an agreeable and passive female while she secretly maneuvers circumstances to suit her goal. Stanhope advises her to maintain the performance even after the result has been achieved: “And, to add the finishing Touch to the complete Victory, do not seem to know that you have won it. As you never let him discover, during the Attempt to ween him from these false Pleasures, that you was attempting to draw him from them; so, now you have effected it, never let him discover that you once thought him addicted to them” (22).

There seem to be two wives here—one following society’s rules for meekness and obedience and the other using the appearance of propriety to fool her husband.

Just as in other advice books and plays like those of Hannah Cowley, the slight deviation is permitted (and encouraged) because the end result is socially acceptable. To return again to Cowley’s A Bold Stroke for a Husband, Victoria is allowed the much greater transgression of dressing as a man to seduce her husband’s mistress because she does so only to restore the family unit and return her wayward mate to his proper place by her side. Stanhope’s reader is given
specific instructions—how to correct her husband’s misbehavior by adopting a certain strategy. However, there is no guarantee that she and other readers won’t employ this information in other circumstances, which is what makes these small inconsistencies so intriguing. While adhering to the constructs that governed women’s lives, even apparently rigid writers like “the Female Mentor” and Stanhope acknowledged imperfections and pointed out gaps that women could exploit to their benefit.

As Stanhope’s book indicates, changes to courtship and the process of selecting a partner for oneself also necessitated a rethinking of behavior inside the marriage. Her chapters include topics such as the management of a family, visitors of ceremony, the continuance of affection, quarrels, and disputes over trivial matters. Even if a marriage is companionate, its participants need guidance, and in this new terrain, women could find opportunities for action; small ones, but opportunities nonetheless.

**The Role of Woman**

While Stanhope instructed her reader on life as a married woman, Mrs. Cockle addresses almost every phase and role young ladies might encounter. Her *Important Studies for the Female Sex, in Reference to Modern Manners; Addressed to a Young Lady of Distinction* (1809) features a lengthy quote attributed to “Burke” on the title page, which allows the author to declare her dedication to both God and enlightenment: “The more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger traces we every where find of his wisdom, who made it...The elevation of the mind ought to be the principal end of all our studies, which, if they do not in some measure
effect, they are of little service to us.” Her juxtaposition of religion and reason echoes earlier writers’ praise of the institution of marriage before they proceeded to maneuver within it. Here, God seems to endorse the education Mrs. Cockle is about to provide. The chapters guide readers almost from cradle to grave, beginning with the importance of “religious example” before continuing to outline the importance of truth and charity, the duties of women as daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend, the evils of seduction, “the Value and proper Use of Time,” and finally, “On death.” One chapter, titled somewhat coyly, “On Attachment,” addresses courtship.

Mrs. Cockle’s advice is not markedly different from earlier writers’. She warns readers of the dangers of familiarity, just as The Matrimonial Preceptor and Hannah Cowley:

The lover perhaps becomes her husband, and too often on becoming the latter ceases at once to be the former. The magnifying glass is removed from his eyes, the optical delusion ceases, and the goddess becomes a mere woman. No longer adored or worshipped with a sort of Pagan idolatry, she disdains every other tribute to her power, and too often brings upon herself the distinction of a faded beauty and a slighted wife.

(109-10)

Mrs. Cockle, however, seems more concerned with the effect this transformation will have on the woman than she is worried about the marriage. Her method of combatting such a sad eventuality and preserving her dear readers is to exhort them to base their choice of husband on more than physical attraction. “The man of sense and real worth,” she writes reassuringly, will look deeper and will appreciate depth of character, thus ensuring a happy match (110). Although she does not write specifically about education, she is clearly placing interior qualities above outward
appearance; the man she describes, the one worth accepting, might be attracted by beauty, but he will not stay if the woman possesses only beauty alone.

Mrs. Cockle is wary of performance. Beauty seems to be a mask that must be got behind. Her generous statements about the nature of men notwithstanding, she advises her readers to remain watchful and discreet, charging them to deceive men about the depth of their emotions until they are certain of his: “To judge in such cases from actions not words, is alas! the error of our sex in general. It is the rock on which their happiness is often destroyed for ever. The privilege of man is to select—that of woman to accept or reject” (112). Mrs. Cockle is concerned that her young readers will allow their power to go to their heads, and she presses upon them the importance of carefully evaluating a man’s behavior and making an informed decision:

Let his attentions be marked with every degree of homage, of assiduity, of attraction, yet never for a moment suffer yourself to suppose any man has a preference for you till he has declared it, and then reflect seriously ere you reply to such a declaration; consider it not as the little triumph of vanity, receive it not with the pride of conquest, but recollect that on your determination rests the probable happiness or misery of your future life.

(113)

Her position echoes that of some of the writers appearing in _The Matrimonial Preceptor_, who suggested that men exercise a similar caution and base their choices in reason, not just emotion.

Advice following such a conservative strain betrays a contradiction within the evolving concept of marriage. As historian Wendy Moore points out, “By the mid-1700s, relatively few parents still attempted to force through matches to which their offspring patently objected.
Marrying for love, rather than money, had become the norm. Yet...the outcomes of this fundamental change in society’s attitudes toward marriage did not bring universal joy” (8). The definition of marriage had in some ways become more strict with the passage of the Hardwicke Act, but the legal changes had been accompanied by a greater freedom among many participants. Conduct books, plays, and novels actively discouraged men and women alike from marrying for money and emphasized the benefits of a union based on mutual esteem and affection. But the writers seem reluctant to place the future of an entire social institution in the hands of inexperienced young people. Ominous warnings about “the probable happiness or misery of your future life” refer not just to the lives of the readers, but to the life of marriage itself (Cockle 113). Mrs. Cockle even reminds her readers that their present situation is a unique one, observing that theirs was not the age of romance and that there are no more knights errant falling at the feet of fair ladies: “No longer separated with monastic strictness men and women from constant intercourse, see each other as they really are. The former are no longer resistless cavaliers, the latter no longer captive damsels or enthralled princesses” (115-116). She does not explain, however, what men and women “really are,” and her opinion on whether this new familiarity is good or bad seems ambivalent.

The question of what men and women “really are” remains obscure; Mrs. Cockle has warned against the duplicity of men, and she begs her female readers to be virtuous and not coquettish. So which is real and which is a performance? She admits a disconnect between words

53 Mrs. Cockle’s description brings to mind Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote. The title character, Arabella, models her behavior on the heroines she has read about in medieval French romances, much to the dismay of her suitor and friends. She does not become truly eligible for marriage until she has been “cured” and learns how to conduct herself as other eighteenth-century young ladies. Does she become what she truly is at that point, or does she merely exchange one performance for another?
and actions, and she judges words the safer indicator, but the matter was far from settled in the minds of her contemporary writers. On stage, words and actions were sometimes at odds and sometimes in agreement—both as truth and as deception. Many of Hannah Cowley’s plays, as seen in chapter 2, exploit questions about disguise and appearance to the benefit of the heroine, but Mrs. Cockle is less confident. It is, of course, the unease of Mrs. Cockle that makes plays like Cowley’s even more resonant with audiences, which in turn gave Mrs. Cockle something else to worry about.

Moore observes that early eighteenth-century novels supposedly “[undermined] the concept of arranged marriages and [fueled] expectations of romantic love” (8). Her conclusion is equivocal: “Whether the rising popularity of novels really influenced views on marriage or simply reflected changing opinion can probably never be determined,” but writers like Mrs. Cockle seem to share her indecision (8). Many conduct books, including The Female Mentor as discussed above, addressed the dangers of novel-reading, attacking the potential for young girls to develop unrealistic expectations for their lives and loves. Even advice literature that did not directly criticize a taste for fiction attempted to ground its counsel firmly in reality, such as Mrs. Cockle’s reminder about marriage being a choice that will decide future happiness.

*******

While Mrs. Cockle’s approach is straightforward and her mention of the age of romance can be read as either nostalgia for a simpler time or a critique of romantic fairy tales, many other writers borrow from fiction in order to make their point, indicating that while the rising novel
learned from conduct books, it was a reciprocal arrangement. *The Matrimonial Preceptor* contains numerous chapters that feature allegorical figures; *The Science of Love* includes scripts; and other books are presented as collections of letters from a wise mentor to a naïve young lady (an inverse of the *Pamela* and *Evelina* model). The confusion about genre reflects and parallels uncertainty about marriage and women. If marriage could be re-imagined, and potentially women’s role within it, did this fluidity also extend to women themselves?

Answers to that question were being explored in the theatre and in conduct manuals, where women were being told to hide behind emotional disguises, to manipulate their husbands, and to exercise the power to accept or reject. Kristina Straub, in her study of sexuality on the eighteenth-century stage, theorizes that the emerging “new model for defining gender and sexuality necessitates social institutions and ideologies that structure gender into separate, opposed spheres—hence, the sexual economy of the male spectator and the female spectacle” (20). This act of division was also happening in the advice literature, which was carefully sorting the respective responsibilities of each party within courtship. Mrs. Cockle, for example, marks out distinctly gendered “privileges”: men select and women accept or reject (112). Even books like *The Matrimonial Preceptor*, which contains chapters addressed to both men and women, does not list in its contents any writing on the duties of a husband, though it lists quite a few detailing those of a wife.

Misty Anderson describes the stage comedy’s attempt to balance convention with progressive models of marriage: “Comic events establish positions of authority for the negotiating heroines of these plays, while comic closure assures the audience that marriage will
survive these negotiations...[These] plays make marriages work by suggesting that although something may be wrong with the institution, it can be made right” (2, 3). Efforts to “make it right” played out in the pages of conduct books as well; although writers seemed to agree that caution should be exercised before the wedding, their thinking diverges on the best behavior after the ceremony, when everyday life resumes.

In an essay on “The Ambiguities of Literature,” Jean-Paul Desaive writes, “In the mirror of literature every woman could both dream and learn about the power, and fragility, of her charms; about the infidelity of men and the benefits of marriage; about the need to be (or at least to appear) virtuous; and about guilty desires” (293-4). Although his discussion centers on French and English poetry and novels, the description suits an expansive definition of “literature” to include conduct books and theatre. In each of these, women could find examples of what to do, what not to do, and how to combine the two.

Without learning how to perform, the small freedoms identified for women would have been impossible. The deviations required an apparent adherence to the rules, an allegiance to the old ways even as the new ways were being explored and defined. Victor Turner’s reintegration, after all, is not a return to the way things were before the crisis and the breach; the ensuing social drama fits the pieces together in a new way, leaving gaps wide enough for imaginative action.

Together, literature carried on a conversation about women’s behavior that was not just a one-way feeding of information from conduct manuals to novels. Rather, the advice literature both shared with and drew from novels and theatre, imitating form and function, elucidating points, arguing against and agreeing with what was seen on stage and read in fiction. These three
mirrors reflected each other as well as the women who looked into each of them, all of them together rehearsing and experimenting with the roles they all should play.
Chapter 4
Training to be a Heroine: Jane Austen’s Performing Women

This work began with Shakespeare and now concludes with Jane Austen. Shakespeare’s heroines have established a theatrical precedent for the ways in which ideals of womanhood were visually and verbally constructed—a woman was known by the clothes she wore and the words she spoke, as well as the words that were said about her. Springing forward to the eighteenth century, the template has been applied first to playwright Hannah Cowley, then to conduct manuals, and now to the novels of Jane Austen. Shakespeare and Austen have kept company before; in 1821, an assessment of Northanger Abbey in Quarterly Review claimed that Austen’s characters were drawn with skill that was “hardly exceeded even by Shakespeare himself” (Whatley n.pag.).

Modern criticism has followed suit, such as Donald A. Bloom’s connection of As You Like It’s Rosalind with Elizabeth Bennet of Pride and Prejudice. Bloom, however, ventures to suggest that Austen’s character does in fact surpass Shakespeare’s, faulting the dramatist for “not [giving] us a very clear reason why Orlando and Rosalind should love each other and not someone else” (72). Even if Bloom is unsatisfied by the “why” of the Orlando-Rosalind romance, the “how” is particularly significant here. It might be more accurate to call it the Orlando-Ganymede-Rosalind romance, as the disguise that Rosalind assumes and the

54 It is interesting to note that no distinction is made between a playwright and a novelist. The two mediums under discussion seem equally comparable to the reviewer (and presumably his audience). This is a subtle indication that the lines between the various modes of writing were so porous as to be barely, if at all, perceived.
55 To be fair, Shakespeare does not simply forget to address the question. He rarely explains why his lovers should be with each other. Even allowing for the fact that Romeo and Juliet’s first conversation serendipitously forms a sonnet, the fickle young man who was just hours ago breaking his heart over another woman and the innocent daughter of his family’s sworn enemy do not immediately seem to be an ideally matched couple.
performances that both she and Orlando engage in are key to the success of the courtship.

None of Austen’s female characters dress as men and initiate vaguely homosexual relationships with the men they love, but they do participate in less visual performances. Bloom’s study focuses on the “witty heroine,” and it is the verbal dexterity and intelligence of both Rosalind and Elizabeth Bennet that he finds noteworthy. Austen follows the example of the eighteenth-century theatre and conduct manuals by picking up Shakespearean traditions of performance and adapting dramatic conventions to her own medium.

Recent scholarship has examined closely the contributions of women to the “rise of the novel,” so conspicuously absent from Ian Watt’s account of the medium’s provenance. Scholars such as Nancy Armstrong have argued for the recognition of the influence conduct books exercised on the novel’s development. Another group of critics have increased the discussion of eighteenth-century theatre, long limited to Goldsmith and Sheridan. Uniting all these efforts reveals a three-part conversation between theatre, conduct literature, and novels, with the performances of woman as centerpiece and connection. As we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, the conversationalists sometimes agreed and expanded on each other’s ideas, and they sometimes undermined and attacked each other. Together, they debated what a woman should do, how extensively she should be allowed to enter the public sphere, what she should read, learn, and know, and how she should act. The social conventions that emerged from these pages governed the lives of women, and the discussion itself gave women new opportunities for self-expression; even women who wrote about the need for women to remain in the domestic sphere violated their own dictum by publishing books. The argument about freedom was itself a form of liberty.
This chapter focuses on two of Jane Austen’s novels: *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*. The books were published seven years apart, *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811 and *Northanger Abbey* posthumously in 1818. The later book was written much earlier and is often included in discussions of Austen’s juvenilia. Although all of Austen’s novels rely on performance to navigate fraught social situations, these two books feature heroines who have particular trouble reading cues. Marianne Dashwood and Catherine Morland seem to drift between the worlds they have read about and the ones they inhabit, unsure how to apply information gathered in books to the very real theatre of life. Austen thus illustrates the tension women face as they decide how and what to perform, blurring the lines that separate reading from acting and novels from theatre.

Many eighteenth-century female writers wrote across mediums and genres, and although Austen wrote and adapted short plays for family use, her published work comprises prose fiction alone. All of her novels, however, are concerned with performance—the ways in which people behave to establish their identity as men and women within a society that was examining the markers of class and gender. Austen’s heroines frequently push against the social boundaries that govern their lives, questioning by word or deed the expectations placed upon them, suggesting that if they are capable of acting one social role, they could just as easily assume another. These women, though each is undeniably Austen’s own creation, carry echoes of Shakespearean characters such as Beatrice and Rosalind, as well as Cowley’s confident sisterhood. Austen borrows performative devices from theatre, and the result is some of the liveliest heroines, and most pointed social critique, in literature.
Cowley showed audiences how to use performance to their advantage, but her comic figures did not often engage in extensive commentary on why such performances were needed. Austen’s omniscient narrators and reflective heroines, however, exploited the medium of the novel to not just observe, but also to criticize, the situations that forced women to perform. Her characters often found a kind of freedom through their actions, but neither they nor Austen forget the restrictions that surround them.

While playwrights such as Inchbald and Cowley used their visual platform to show characters in disguises and deceptions, they also incorporated an awareness of societal and gendered performance. As shown in chapter 2, Cowley’s heroine in *The Belle’s Stratagem* boasts about her ability to be changeable and perform a variety of personalities and roles as she allows her new husband to instruct her on which persona to adopt permanently. Austen’s characters, though visible only in readers’ imaginations, likewise demonstrate an ability to adjust their own appearances to suit their needs. The characters do more than just indulge in simplistic selfish manipulations, instead proving themselves capable of reading the rules society has established, recognizing their often arbitrary nature, and using performance to seem to conform while they pursue their best interests.

Austen’s novels exemplify how thoroughly the stage permeated written culture through their unwavering consciousness of the ways performance extends to everyday life. The very worlds her characters inhabit are stages upon which parts must be played, and the lesson many of Austen’s heroines learn is how to play their appointed role and how to discern good performances from bad, such as those required by society versus malicious deceit. Like many
eighteenth-century writers, Austen’s attention to performance is usually linked to depictions of
temale behavior, either appropriate or transgressive (or both). This chapter argues that by
adopting many of the techniques playwrights used to present unconventional interpretations of
the female ideal on stage, Austen created characters who embodied both novelistic and theatrical
conventions. Like their counterparts in the theatre, Austen’s heroines often exhibit behavior that
blurs the lines between respectability and rebellion.

Perhaps because the eighteenth-century English theatre was largely ignored by critics
until recently, many studies of the theatre’s connection to the novel focus on drawing almost
literal links between the two, such as focusing on writers Eliza Haywood and Elizabeth Inchbald,
who wrote for both mediums. Many analyses of Austen and theatre center on Mansfield Park, in
which a home presentation of Inchbald’s Lovers’ Vows is condemned by the strict patriarch and
by Fanny Price, the protagonist. Fanny’s dislike of the enterprise has been frequently interpreted
as Austen’s own opinion, but close examination of her novels leads to the opposite conclusion.
Austen’s characters rely on performance to achieve their desires, and Austen’s own love for
theatre has been established by Paula Byrne and Penny Gay, who both (separately) published
books titled Jane Austen and the Theatre in 2002. Their approaches to the subject do differ
slightly.

Byrne’s introduction provides evidence that the Austen family enjoyed domestic
performances much like the one in Mansfield Park (though presumably with happier
conclusions) and that Austen was often the author of their play-scripts as well as an enthusiastic
participant (xi-xii). Byrne takes pains to establish a lack of antipathy toward the theatre on
Austen’s part, arguing instead that the novelist had an extensive knowledge of and appreciation for contemporary plays.

The links are so strong, in fact, that Byrne identifies direct character and structural parallels between Sense and Sensibility and Richard Sheridan’s The Rivals, arguing that Marianne is similar to Lydia Languish and that Austen’s romantic pairings mirror Sheridan’s. Byrne points out Austen’s use of what she calls “quasi-theatrical techniques,” which she defines as “scenic construction, intricate plot-lines, razor-sharp dialogue, ‘set-piece encounters’ and strong sustained characterization” (xiii). Byrne remains attentive to theatre and what might be called the staging of the novel.

Penny Gay’s Jane Austen and the Theatre takes a slightly less literal approach than Byrne. Rather than highlighting direct structural links, she examines the “theatricality” of Austen’s novels. She points out the relevance of performativity, citing Judith Butler’s work on the performance of gender and concluding, “By emphasizing the theatricality of this apparently natural but compulsively repeated process, Austen is making her own contribution to the documentation of it” (23-4). Gay links everyday life, and the marriage plot in particular, to theatre and to the carnivalesque. She acknowledges the significance of theatrical conventions and the rituals of social engagement within the intricate activities of Austen’s heroines.

Similarly, Nora Nachumi examines Mansfield Park’s home theatrical as emblematic of performances that occurred in everyday life. Nachumi acknowledges that Fanny Price seems to be “the only character in the novel incapable of acting in a theatrical sense,” but she concludes

---

56 In an earlier paragraph, Byrne describes her understanding of the term “set-piece” as “chapters or episodes...analogous in shape and length to a scene in a play” (xii).
that not even Fanny is immune to “the theatrical imperative governing *Mansfield Park*” (165, 166). Claudia L. Johnson points out that “every major character is acting all of the time” (100), and Nachumi provides examples of Fanny’s own off-stage performances, such as her concealment of her dislike of the Crawfords and her love for Edmund; Nachumi observes that “Fanny does not regard such behavior as acting. Nevertheless, her determination to disguise her affection for Edmund requires her to perform in a theatrical sense” (167). Johnson and Nachumi thus begin to extend the discussion of Austen and theatre beyond and into the writing—past the surface similarities to or discussions of theatre and into the characters themselves as actors on the stage of everyday life.

A key contributor to the script of everyday performances was advice literature. Barbara Laughlin Adler’s study of argument and discussion styles in Austen’s novels credits conduct manuals with teaching men and women how to talk to each other along strictly gendered lines. She proposes that “women learned to back away from verbal conflict with men, remain meek, and avoid speaking up. Gentlemen were advised to abstain from any serious discussion with women and, instead, to talk of light topics such as fashion, gossip and family” (166). In contrast to conduct books, however, on the stage, women often disagreed with what men would have them do and engaged in explanations of their actions, frequently taking the male authority figure to task for being unreasonable.

Adler establishes that Austen’s characters generally follow the rhetorical rules laid out for them; i.e., women argue like women and men argue like men. But she points out that Austen’s heroines “make conscious choices about speaking up in opposition to men...they offer polite and
rational thoughts in clear, articulate language, with ‘ease’ and fluency. By doing so, these women stand equal to men in terms of verbal rationality and eloquence, while still fulfilling the spirit of social courtesy and feminine decorum” (175).57 Austen has also made a conscious choice to follow the example of theatre, which has no omniscient narrator to share a character’s thoughts with the audience. If a woman in a play wants her feelings and opinions to be known, she must speak. Austen endows her heroines with similar agency, allowing them to perform “feminine decorum” even as they speak their minds.

From their inception, novels were closely linked to theatre, as studies by critics such as Emily Hodgson Anderson have shown. A neglect of eighteenth-century theatre combined with a focus on the influence of conduct manuals on the evolution of the novel have resulted in a somewhat distorted view of the three-part conversation that emerged among novels, plays, and advice literature. A common link was performance; writers of conduct books instructed women on how to behave—in other words, how to act, how to perform. As discussed in the previous chapter, these books borrowed from theatre, which in turn played with ideas set out in the books. Both mediums then inspired novels that were infused with ideas of performance. Even Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, often compared to a conduct manual, is equally a primer on performance: By acting the part of a virtuous and delicate upper-class lady, right down to the clothes, the literacy, and the propensity to swoon, Pamela proves herself fit to play the role on a permanent basis. In the end, her virtue (or perhaps her bravura performance) is rewarded. By acting like a true lady, she becomes one.

57 Adler devotes much of her discussion to scenes from Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Mansfield Park, and Persuasion, but her observations encompass Austen’s oeuvre as a whole.
Subsequent novels imitate *Pamela*’s trajectory, but female writers seem to emphasize an awareness that “correct” behavior is a thing taught and is therefore not inherently natural and above questioning. Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, for example, illustrates society’s intolerance of anyone who has learned the wrong rules. Arabella cannot be rewarded with marriage and respectability until she abandons what she has gleaned from medieval romances and conforms to eighteenth-century governance. She must be taught how to play the correct role convincingly. But by allowing Arabella to appear ludicrous by her adherence to ancient guidelines, Lennox invites questions about her own era’s dictums. Everything women do, she points out, is a performance.

The matter was not settled when Hannah Cowley’s plays were being produced in the late eighteenth century, nor when Jane Austen published her books. While critics have discussed Austen’s knowledge of the stage and incorporation of its set-pieces and structural composition, I instead focus here on the performances of the characters and the ways they present themselves and function within society. Austen’s characters navigate rigorous societal expectations and must perform both the role they have and the role they want. They must decipher the performances of those around them—no easy task, as demonstrated, for example, by Elizabeth Bennet’s gullible belief in Wickham’s extravagant stories about Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Catherine Morland’s blindly adoring friendship with Isabella in *Northanger Abbey*. Even Marianne, considered *Sense and Sensibility*’s most transparent and emotionally honest heroine, performs according to the novels she reads, as she determines not to sleep the night after Willoughby leaves. Austen engages with questions of conduct and endows her characters with performative
skill, even when the stories do not involve any obvious discussion of the theatre itself, thus demonstrating the strength of the connection between theatre and novels.

My readings of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* are informed by performance studies, which defines “performance” broadly and doesn’t limit it to theatre; a key root of performance is ritual, and Jane Austen’s novels are highly attuned to the rituals society participates in, from the balls to the teas to the finding of spouses. Erving Goffman links ritualized performance with social roles, which he defines as “the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status”; the social role is secured by the repeated performance of a “pre-established pattern of action” before a certain audience (16). All actions are social performances, and actions are meant to achieve not only what the action itself is meant to achieve, but also a certain impression of the person performing the action (15-16). Indeed, Austen’s characters often are keenly aware of the way others will or should react to their behavior and carefully adjust their actions accordingly.

Goffman accounts for such awareness and intent by distinguishing between what he calls “cynical” and “sincere” performances: “When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (18). He admits that many cynical performances might be prompted by malice or mischief, but he also points out that some deceptions are benevolent, such as a doctor prescribing a placebo (18); to his examples might be added many of the deceptions carried out by Hannah Cowley’s characters. Because, as Judith Butler has observed, gender is “an identity instituted through a *stylized*
repetition of acts” (“Performative Acts,” 270), female characters could use these repetitions to their advantage by engaging in cynical performances of gendered acts. Thus, they were able to convince their audience that they were respectable young women while they pursued their own desires.

Speech is significant in the actions Austen’s characters undertake. The novels are filled with and driven by dialogue, which heightens their similarities to theatre. Candace Nolan-Grant proposes that J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts can be applied to the worlds within Jane Austen’s fiction, calling her literature “language-based...[which suggests] that most events within that society transpire by the agency of words” (863). Further, Nolan-Grant stresses, “utterance and writing are the events” (863). In Austin’s theory, speaking makes a thing so, as in declaring a wager, making out a will, christening a ship, or participating in a marriage ceremony (5-6). By these criteria, Nolan-Grant points out, Sense and Sensibility opens with and is shaped by a succession of speech acts: Mr. Dashwood’s two marriages, his will, and a promise of financial support his son fails to keep all result in the removal of the surviving Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters from their home at Norland to Barton Cottage, where they are introduced to a new circle of friends and potential husbands (865). Another flurry of speech acts further settles the fates of the Dashwoods at the conclusion of the novel, when more marriages and bequests make it possible for Elinor to wed Edward and Colonel Brandon to win Marianne.

The sisters, however, are not just pawns in the speech act game, as they navigate their own powers of performativity. Austin’s theory requires certain words and “appropriate circumstances” (13). The Dashwoods must learn to distinguish between a successful speech act
and one that is “void,” “hollow,” and “not consummated” (16-17). Felicia Bonaparte has discussed the significance of reading accurately in Austen’s novels, focusing primarily on *Pride and Prejudice* and a literal understanding of “reading” and “texts.” Yet the concept can be applied figuratively as well. Marianne is frustrated by her inability to read the text of Willoughby’s actions; she does not know what was true and what was false, or to return to the language of Austin’s speech act, what was felicitous and what was a misfire. As Nolan-Grant observes, “Marianne foolishly trusts action alone and suffers for it”; she argues that a string of misinterpreted speech acts form the narrative’s groundwork (866). Marianne’s reading of Willoughby is further complicated by the question of his performance—is it cynical or sincere? Goffman places “cynical” and “sincere” as extremes on a continuum, making it possible that Willoughby was, perhaps, cynically sincere.

What emerges in Austen’s novels, therefore, is a combination of, first, the performed social action as described by Goffman and exemplified by Richardson’s Pamela, and second, the spoken speech act as defined by J.L. Austin and delineated by Nolan-Grant. Attention to performance as both act and action distinguish the literature of eighteenth-century England; as noted above, Austen’s novels are not the only examples of the period’s preoccupation with performance. Her fellow writers, both preceding and contemporary, employed similar theatrical devices. In particular, authors such as Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Maria Edgeworth wrote both fiction and plays. It is relatively simple to identify a kind of literary cross-pollination in writers who participated in multiple mediums; it comes as little surprise that someone trained in the theatre would transfer what she had learned when writing for the stage to
her prose fiction as well. Critics often point to such cases to strengthen the claim for a re-examination of the theatre and of women’s contribution to it and to the rise of the novel. I hope to further support such efforts by extending the discussion to a non-dramatic writer such as Austen and arguing that the theatre’s influence was so pervasive that its concerns and methods present themselves in a broad range of mediums and sources. Identifying evidence of a mutually influential relationship between conduct manuals, theatre, and novels will deepen scholarly understanding of the way literary expressions evolved in the eighteenth century, as well as illuminate the contributions of women as both subject and creator, role and actor, performance and performer.

*******

Jane Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, was printed in 1811. The two elder Dashwood sisters seem to embody the contrasting ideologies: Elinor has calm, logical sense and Marianne succumbs to the grand emotions embraced by sensibility. The book chronicles their lives in the aftermath of their father’s death, an event that forces them, their younger sister Margaret, and their mother to turn over their home to their older half-brother and take up residence in a cottage in a neighboring county. The sisters each fall in love, suffer disappointment, and in the end, marry. Similar to Claudia L. Johnson’s claim that all characters in *Mansfield Park* are acting all the time (100), and contrary to Marianne’s proclamation that she conceals nothing, the characters of *Sense and Sensibility* perform in various ways for a range of reasons and to different audiences.

As the plays of Hannah Cowley demonstrate, performance is necessary for marriage, and
Austen seems to agree. Much of the performances are connected to courtship. Almost every main character keeps at least one secret from the others, including family members. Even Marianne, who professes an open and sharing nature, does not reveal her true relationship with Willoughby to Elinor and seems to expect Elinor to hide her feelings for Edward, though she later recriminates her for doing just that. In chapter 4, Marianne laments Edward’s faults, but she assures Elinor that “I shall very soon think him handsome, Elinor, if I do not now. When you tell me to love him as a brother, I shall no more see imperfection in his face, than I now do in his heart” (n.pag.). She is astonished to learn that Elinor and Edward are not in fact engaged, and her surprise indicates that she fully expected her sister to conceal the progress of her romance. Performance, it seems, is a matter of course. However, in chapter 27, she scolds Elinor for telling her nothing about Edward and declares that she conceals nothing about Willoughby, although she has never clearly related the status of their relationship; only when his engagement to Miss Grey is discovered does Marianne admit that there had been no formal understanding or declaration of love between them.

For Marianne, the action matters more than the impression it gives; the action might even supersede what it communicates. The performance, not the message, is paramount. She believes she has concealed nothing from Elinor because she has not endeavored to hide the strength of her feelings for Willoughby. How her actions have been interpreted is not her concern. Yet she has been made aware of the disconnect between reality and interpretation in her first conversation.

58 Many of Hannah Cowley’s characters discussed in chapter 2 engage in performances designed to conceal the truth from their fathers. Conduct manuals delineating courtship and marriage seldom advise a young lady on how to behave with her immediate family, aside from the perfunctory counsel to respect her parents. Austen combines both methods, indicating that there are no limits on when and for whom performance might be necessary.
with Elinor about Edward, when Elinor tells her she’s had no assurances of Edward’s affection for her: “Marianne was astonished to find how much the imagination of her mother and herself had outstripped the truth” (n.pag.). Austen’s characters must navigate performance in all its guises, not only presenting their own, but also understanding how they will be perceived by others and how to likewise make their own translations of other people’s performances.

Marianne fails to follow the example of both conduct books and the theatre, which stressed the importance of performance in every aspect of courtship. She alone among the characters does not deliberately guard a secret. She never tells Elinor that she and Willoughby are engaged; though her conduct has led Elinor to that conclusion, Marianne would doubtless hold herself blameless. Elinor’s explanation of the Edward situation echoes advice literature’s counsel that a woman should declare her own preference for a man only after he has declared his for her: “I am by no means assured of his regard for me. There are moments when the extent of it seems doubtful; and till his sentiments are fully known, you cannot wonder at my wishing to avoid any encouragement of my own partiality, by believing or calling it more than it is” (n.pag.). Only by concealing her own feelings can Elinor secure Edward’s affection, but Marianne follows a different set of rules, and her own love affair is unsuccessful.

Similarly, as discussed in the second chapter, Hannah Cowley’s heroines often deceive male authority figures, either lovers or fathers, in order to induce, avoid, or restore a marriage, such as Letitia Hardy’s flirtatious behavior at the masquerade ball in *The Belle’s Stratagem* or Olivia’s pretend shrewishness in *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*. Marianne’s interaction with Willoughby defies all of these precedents and is utterly devoid of performance. She hides her
esteem neither from him nor from society at large. She sees no reason to disguise her feelings: “But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions” (n.pag.). While Cowley’s characters used disguise to question the rules, Marianne does so by insisting on a lack of performance altogether. She is perhaps more akin to Lennox’s Arabella, taking her guidance from the “sensibility” books she has read, as the fair female quixote aligned herself with medieval heroines, rather than molding their behavior to suit the society in which they lived. Both remained chaste and above “real disgrace,” but neither was entirely beyond reproach.

As much as Marianne might protest otherwise, however, her behavior is not entirely without guile. By making a choice to be open about her feelings, she is indeed performing the part of a girl of sensibility. The gently mocking narrator seems to further establish the calculation behind Marianne’s professed spontaneous expressions of emotions when relating her reaction to Willoughby’s unexpected departure for London:

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it...She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!
Although her despair is genuine and she is in no danger of betraying her ideals, her awareness of them is a reminder that she knows the requirements of the part she is playing. Even if the part seems natural and effortless, it is a part and a performance nonetheless.

Marianne’s ability to embody a performance so completely is her salvation in the end. Although she resolves to exert Elinor-like control over her emotions in future, her failure to do so ensures her happiness. At the novel’s conclusion, Marianne weds Colonel Brandon, apparently because he is a good man and everyone expects her to. But though her initial feelings contain “no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship,” the narrator reports further that “Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (n.pag.). Here, as with her reaction to Willoughby’s departure, Marianne attempts to demonstrate that an awareness of the guidelines does not necessarily mean that following them equates putting on an act. But her performance of devoted wife remains a performance, even as it moves along Goffman’s continuum from well-meaning cynicism to sincere.

By pointing out the significance and necessity of performance to the function of society, Austen encourages her readers to examine the structures within which they operate. She also seems to withhold judgement; although Marianne lauds Elinor’s behavior and promises to model her own conduct accordingly, the narrator makes it clear that if Marianne had Elinor’s temperament, she might not have been so happy with a second choice of lover in the end. Elinor, though she has never entirely agreed with Marianne’s romantic notion that a heart can truly love
only once, is the only character who never faces the dilemma in her own life. Edward dismisses his secret engagement to Lucy Steele as youthful whimsy, but at one time, he did feel so strongly that he asked her to marry him, knowing how vehemently his family would disapprove. The artful Miss Steele transfers her affections to his brother; Colonel Brandon passionately loved a girl in his youth; Willoughby marries Miss Grey and is content with her; and Marianne recovers from her affair with Willoughby to make a happy life with Brandon. Elinor alone remains fixed in her affections. No amount of sense, it seems, can effectively govern the heart.

The methodology of each sister succeeds because whether they admit it or not, their actions are informed by performance. Elinor is clearly more aware of the part she plays than is Marianne; Elinor knows she must conceal her feelings for Edward until he has revealed his to her, and there is never any doubt that she will keep Lucy’s secret. The parameters of her role are always clearly defined for her, so she follows them. Both Brandon and Willoughby turn to her to confide the stories of their previous loves. She is recognized as one who plays her part to perfection, and her patience is rewarded.

Marianne, however, by seeming to break the rules, accomplishes a tricky feat: she does not initially get what she wants, but she ultimately wants what she gets. But as discussed above, she really only appears to break the rules. As she points out, none of her actions result in disgrace, and although she might protest otherwise, she does indeed engage in performance. Austen does not contrast two sisters who follow and flout social convention, but instead presents two equally effective ways to participate in the social drama of eighteenth-century England. She achieves this paradox by employing devices similar to those found on stage, endowing her
characters with keen performative and observational skills. Characters watch each other and comment on the appearances and conduct of others. They are usually aware that they are being watched in turn; Marianne understands that she will be perceived as a follower of the tenets of sensibility, even as she disregards the finer points of performance and interpretation. Nora Nachumi’s assessment of Mansfield Park transfers easily to Sense and Sensibility, a novel that sets a precedent for what Nachumi calls Austen’s “primary interest,” which is “[the preservation of] the spectator’s ability to reason while experiencing emotion” (148). This is achieved, at least in part, by “[collapsing] the distinction between onstage and off and, in doing so, [dramatizing] the theatrical nature of ordinary social intercourse” (153). The center of much of Nachumi’s reasoning is the rehearsal of Lovers’ Vows, and while there are no similar home theatricals undertaken by the Dashwood sisters, they are equally attuned to the social performances around them, and the difference between onstage and off is perhaps even more markedly blurred in the earlier novel.

Elinor in particular is rarely offstage, especially after Lucy Steele has forced her into a silent conspiracy by telling her a secret that Elinor must keep from everyone, including her sister. Her every conversation is thus a pretense as she must hide her knowledge of Lucy’s engagement to Edward and her feelings about it. She is a repository of secrets, and although it is her calm and straightforward manner that makes her appear so trustworthy, the result is really an enigmatic young woman who knows something about everyone, though she consistently pretends otherwise. Indeed, as Emily Hodgson Anderson observes in her study of the links between eighteenth-century theatre and novels, “any potential to express that which is ‘real’ remains
contingent on the ability to express that which is feigned” (14). Elinor exhibits her very real sense by expressing a feigned persona of ignorance—no one knows what she knows or how she feels. She is interpreted as sincere and trustworthy because she excels at deception.

In this way, Elinor follows the example of other theatrically performative heroines. She is not humorously inclined as are Hannah Cowley’s heroines, aligning instead with Shakespeare’s Viola, who describes a melancholy woman who never told her love, instead sitting “like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief” (Twelfth Night, 2.4.100-101). But like the disguised Viola and the crafty women of Cowley’s comedies, Elinor wears her performance well. She uses her knowledge judiciously, providing Marianne with information about the true nature of both Willoughby and Brandon, and her guardianship of Lucy’s secret could be said to have helped to ensure her own happiness; she waited and let the irrationality of others thwart their own plans. Unlike Cowley’s women, of course, Elinor does not plot and perform in order to secure a desired result. Cowley’s heroines frequently concoct the scheme, drive the action, and assume a deliberate disguise. Elinor is never certain what the outcome of her performance will be. She despairs when she is told that Edward has married Lucy. But like her sisters of the theatre, Elinor is rewarded for playing her part well. Again, the performance is what matters.

Austen carefully draws a distinction between social performances and harmful deception. Although she stops short of condemning Willoughby completely for his callous treatment of young Eliza, allowing him an advantageous marriage and a relatively happy life, her characters make clear their disappointment in him and their relief that Marianne avoided Eliza’s fate.59 One

---

59 Of course, Austen might merely have been reflecting the truth of the society she lived in, which was far more forgiving of men’s indiscretions than it was of women’s.
of Marianne’s primary concerns is whether or not Willoughby’s behavior with her was real or fake, telling Elinor that she would be more at ease “if I could be satisfied on one point, if I could be allowed to think that he was not always acting a part, not always deceiving me” (n.pag.)

Related to this worry is how she responded to his actions. She has realized her inability to interpret the performances of others and has linked her own conduct to her understanding of the way the people around her behave. If Willoughby has indeed deceived her about his feelings for her, then her reaction to him was incorrect. She compares herself unfavorably to Elinor, seeming to grasp the danger of performing before the part is learned.

Marianne’s wariness is entirely reasonable, given the behavior of both Willoughby and Lucy Steele in particular. While most characters seem to use the powers of performance for good, Lucy is far more calculating and unkind. There is little doubt that she shares her secret with Elinor to purposefully thwart the other woman’s hopes. She feels no remorse for the position in which she has placed Elinor, who must now hide her knowledge from her beloved family members. And she abandons the disinherited Edward in favor of his newly wealthy brother at the earliest possible moment. Whether she ever had true affection for Edward is unlikely. Hers is indeed the worst kind of performance.

Willoughby is no better, of course. His seduction and desertion of Eliza is impossible to overlook, but his performance of blamelessness is unsurprising. He would hardly broadcast his indiscretions to his social circle and a potential love interest. He too burdens Elinor with his secret, and though his regret seems genuine, it is hard not to wonder if he is sorrier for what happened with Eliza or for the punishment.
Marianne’s dilemma is not singular. Her anxiety was shared by much of eighteenth-century society as economic shifts threw old markers of identity into question. In Hannah Cowley’s *Who’s the Dupe?*, a character complains that he can’t distinguish dance hall girls from noblewomen because they “hang out false colours” (1.1), and in her *The Belle’s Stratagem*, both virtuous Letitia and angelic Lady Frances are mistaken for prostitutes at a masquerade ball. If everyone in society was assuming a role, it could be difficult to decide who to trust.

Although Barbara M. Benedict names “choice as the path to happiness” in Austen’s novels, she notes that “the identities of women and men, the roles of servants, merchants, and every social class, and the nature of sociability were all changing...Austen’s novels attempt to regulate the usurpation of identity” (147, 148). Although Benedict’s primary concern is with consumerism and the emerging role of the circulating library, she also highlights the importance of good judgement as one of a woman’s more marketable “accomplishments,” which Austen does not limit to the usual dancing, singing, and drawing (147). If, as Benedict explains, Austen’s heroines use their selection of “language, literature, clothes, objects, and entertainments” to advertise their proficiency in the “new, moral accomplishments of wit, judgement, and taste” (147), it seems reasonable to assume that they were also noticing the choices made by the people around them.

Critics such as Benedict and Jacqueline Pearson have explored the use of reading as a method of establishing a woman’s character, and both Pearson and Paula Byrne note that in Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, Lydia Languish hides her novels in books like *The Whole Duty of Man* and displays Fordyce’s *Sermons* open on the table when she is expecting visitors (Pearson np,
Byrne 103).\textsuperscript{60} A heroine’s attitude toward advice literature was a clue to her personality and world view, not only in theatre but in novels as well. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the only Bennet sister who enjoys Mr. Collins’ reading of Fordyce is Mary; spirited Lizzie is thoroughly bored. Of course, the entire purpose of conduct manuals was to instruct young people on proper conduct—how to behave in order to be recognized as a respectable lady or gentlemen. Both the theatre and novels, including Austen’s, offered counter-examples by juxtaposing respectability with rebellion. Claudia L. Johnson explains, “Whereas conduct books teach young women the social codes they must adopt if they are to live acceptably as wives and daughters...*Sense and Sensibility* makes those codes and the communities that dictate them the subject of its interrogation” (50). She calls Elinor and Marianne “romantic heroines” who “challenge the commonplace” and contrasts them with “cold-hearted” Lucy Steele, who “plays the sycophant to wealth and power...[and] finds a place in the world” (50). Johnson’s discussion does involve performance, which makes her use of the word “plays” to describe Lucy’s behavior somewhat striking. Lucy, viewed through any lens, is duplicitous and a dangerous actor. Of course, Elinor and Marianne find their own happy places in the world even as they negotiate the demands of performance. Like her theatrical counterparts, Austen uses performance to align her heroines with both the female ideal and the independence of her spirit.

Even the writers of conduct books knew that being a socially acceptable woman did not equate a performance-free life. As discussed in the preceding chapter, readers were often advised to conceal their true feelings and manipulate their partners; such an esteemed voice as Dr. Pearson, in her discussion of advice literature in *Women’s Reading in Britain*, also points out that “conduct texts...are prominent among the ‘mopeish old books’ that tomboy Joyce in Burney’s *The Woman-Hater* fantasizes about burning.” It is interesting that both these examples are drawn from the theatre.
Gregory recommended that a woman of intellect hide the scope of her knowledge, telling his daughters, “if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (46). The debate is not whether or not a woman should perform, but how. Thus the actions of Elinor, Marianne, and Lucy exhibit variations on a theme, from which women could learn the finer points of performance.

The performances characters engage in are, unsurprisingly, connected to the medium in which they are presented. Theatre, with its access to visual representation, often relied on literal disguises, mistaken identities, masks, and cross-dressing; clothing often operated as a speech act, allowing the people in costume to become what their costume indicated they were. The theatre encouraged theatrical behavior. Similarly, although Austen’s characters are infused with performance, they are also influenced by the form of the novel they inhabit, and their theatricality is thus tied to the act of reading. Their performances must be “read” by their fellow characters, and they must present themselves accordingly and understand how to read the texts around them. Hence Marianne’s anxiety about Willoughby: She has no confidence in her ability to interpret what she reads in other people’s behavior. If he had been “always acting a part” and “always deceiving” her, then she is as much at fault for being a poor reader and interpreter of performance as he is for acting out the lie.

Austen thus unites the visual performatives of the theatre with textual performance, employing words rather than costume to indicate the shifting roles characters inhabit. She adapts a theatrical device to her medium, translating the method and maintaining the purpose.
Performance is no less effective when it can be read and not seen; the words of the characters become their literary costumes, cloaking their identities and hiding their desires until their actions betray them for the pretenders—for good or ill—they are.

********

Although it was written in the late 1790s, *Northanger Abbey* was published posthumously in 1818, bound in a multivolume set with *Persuasion*. Its heroine, Catherine Morland, undergoes a series of unique trials before she is rewarded with the man she loves. The novel is a coming-of-age tale, a chronicle of a young lady’s entrance into the world and her unsure navigation of its habits. Catherine receives many lessons in the art of reading—not only books, but also people. She is an ardent admirer of Gothic fiction and fancies herself (incorrectly) surrounded by mystery and murder when she stays at the titular home. And she throws herself unquestioningly into friendship with Isabella Thorpe, who might have been a protegee of Lucy Steele. Catherine is utterly unschooled in the language of performance, a deficiency that also places her at a disadvantage when it comes to her own ability to act like a woman. Her books have prepared her to understand the actions of heroines, but not the average eighteenth-century young lady, and she cannot find happiness until she shifts from the first role to the second.

The action of the novel takes place primarily on two “stages.” During a visit to Bath with Mr. and Mrs. Allen, childless family friends, Catherine encounters all the main characters who will help shape her future. Isabella Thorpe and she become fast friends, and the master of ceremonies in the Pump Room introduces her to Henry Tilney, with whom she falls in love.
Isabella tries to match Catherine with her brother, John, a clumsy and unwelcome suitor. Through Henry, Catherine meets his sister Eleanor and their father the General and is invited to the Tilneys’ home, Northanger Abbey. Both sets of acquaintances provide Catherine ample opportunities to learn about and perfect her performative skills.

Performance and reading are linked from the start of the novel as the narrator describes Catherine’s youth and education. The very first sentence indicates the central role the act of reading takes in the story that will follow by explaining, “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine” (n.pag.). But like Marianne, who learns from her sensibility novels how to carry on a love affair and react to its demise, Catherine takes her conduct lessons from books, and “from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (n.pag.). With fiction as her guide, Catherine frequently assesses the behavior of people around her erroneously, failing to recognize Isabella’s insincerity and unjustly condemning General Tilney for the death of his wife.

However, although Susan Zlotnick describes Catherine as possessing “authenticity” and lacking “pretension, disguise, and artfulness,” as well as “mercenary motivations” (283), this does not mean that Catherine is completely incapable of performing. She only wants the proper setting, and then she knows how to act. With Gothic novels as her guide, she knows how to approach suspicious trunks and cabinets. She knows that scraps of paper are unlikely to contain mundanities like bills or receipts. And she knows that gruff, overbearing fathers conceal dark
secrets. At Northanger Abbey, Catherine behaves exactly as she thinks she should; it is as if the people around her have a different script.

Although Catherine knows how to behave in what we might call Gothic circumstances, she is not entirely responsible for her misreading of the situation at the abbey. On the journey from Bath to Northanger, Henry Tilney deliberately casts his home as a place of secrets, akin to a castle Ann Radcliffe might have written about. Indeed, Catherine possesses a natural ability to distinguish fact from fiction; as Henry spins his tale of ominous chests, secret passages, and hidden manuscripts, she protests that “this will not happen to me, I am sure” and “This is just like a book! -- But it cannot really happen to me” (n.pag.). But Henry has set the stage, and when she does indeed encounter large and mysterious furniture in her chamber, her heroine instincts refuse to be suppressed. After her fears have been proven foolish—the chest contains linens and the cabinet, only housekeeping accounts—she reflects, “And it was in a great measure [Henry’s] own doing, for had not the cabinet appeared so exactly to agree with his description of her adventures, she should never have felt the smallest curiosity about it” (n.pag.). Henry provided misleading directions to one unsure of her way, and Catherine misreads Henry, again failing to identify a performance given purely for entertainment, as well as her less-than-ominous surroundings.

Zlotnick’s discussion focuses on the reading habits of Isabella, Catherine, and Eleanor and how what they read influences the way they interact with the world. She observes that “Catherine’s reading surely teaches her how to navigate her social world, but it also prompts her to act in ways that suggest an enhanced sense of autonomy” (288). Isabella is governed by her
desire to participate in the marriage market, and Eleanor seems guided by her father and brother. Catherine is imaginative and proactive, living up to the standards of the Gothic heroines she admires. Betty Rizzo, in her examination of Gothic heroines, points out that “cast upon their own resources with no paternal or uxorial guide, they express curiosity and investigate; they speculate of their discoveries; they theorize; they act without consultation rather than plunge for protection into a man’s arms” (61-2). Catherine follows their example, but she is unable to distinguish between the circumstances that would require such behavior and those in which she finds herself—that is, with a fairly ordinary family within an intriguing but basically banal home. Like a tourist entering the Louvre with a map of the Metropolitan Museum, Catherine applies the wrong template and allows her actions and rationale to be informed by inappropriate sources.

_Northanger Abbey_, therefore, is not just a humorous interpretation of the Gothic mode, but it is a lesson in reading and gender performance. While Catherine understands the parameters of the part of a Gothic heroine, she is much less familiar with the rules that should be followed if she wants to be read as a proper young lady. In fact, Henry knows more about the topic than she does. When they first meet, he guesses how the evening will be recorded in her journal:

Yes, I know exactly what you will say: Friday, went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings -- plain black shoes -- appeared to much advantage; but was strangely harassed by a queer, half-witted man, who would make me dance with him, and distressed me by his nonsense. (n.pag.)

Henry demonstrates an awareness of women’s clothing down to the details of trimming and shoes, and he continues to offer his own version of what he wishes she would say instead, in the
process replacing his compliment of her with approbation of himself: “I danced with a very agreeable young man, introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him—seems a most extraordinary genius—hope I may know more of him” (n.pag.). Here, he writes her part for her, delineating in both cases what a woman does: write in a journal about the men she meets. Catherine, however, defies his expectations and suggests the unthinkable by asking, “But, perhaps, I keep no journal“ (n.pag.). Henry reacts with horror and assures her that he is not “so ignorant of young ladies’ ways” as she seems to believe” (n.pag.). If he knows that young ladies keep journals, and Catherine does not keep a journal, then she has neglected to follow one of the gender performance requirements.

Similarly, Henry knows what kind of leisure interests a young lady should have. When Catherine tells him that Eleanor has recently taught her to love a hyacinth, admitting that she is “naturally indifferent about flowers,” Henry encourages her, informing her that “a taste for flowers is always desirable in your sex, as a means of getting you out of doors, and tempting you to more frequent exercise than you would otherwise take” (n.pag.). As usual, Catherine contradicts him: “But I do not want any such pursuit to get me out of doors. The pleasure of walking and breathing fresh air is enough for me, and in fine weather I am out more than half my time. -- Mamma says, I am never within“ (n.pag.). Henry professes an equal awareness of what young ladies ought to feel. After Catherine receives the news that her brother and Isabella have broken their engagement, Henry describes how desolate and empty Catherine must be at the loss of her friend, how she is unlikely to find comfort anywhere, and how no amount of amusements would suffice to cheer her, concluding with “You feel all this?” Catherine requires “a few
moments’ reflection” before responding, “No...I do not—ought I?” (n.pag.) Again, Henry has laid out for her what her behavior should be, and again, his direction has run counter to her own inclination.

In each of these instances, and others which will not be enumerated here, Catherine defies the eighteenth-century ideal of womanhood in two ways. First, she seems completely unaware of the rules Henry dictates to her. It seems never to have occurred to her to keep a journal, and she is apparently not over-fond of writing at all. She has resisted Mrs. Allen’s efforts to educate her about flowers, and she does not allow her reaction to Isabella’s perfidy to be shaped by any consideration other than her own feelings. Second, she lets these facts be known. Although Catherine has her moments of being a pitiable creature, a strange little bundle of trust and suspicion, she is in fact a precursor to Austen’s more famously outspoken heroines. Elizabeth fearlessly argues with Mr. Darcy, Emma rarely retreats from a spirited discussion with Mr. Knightly, and even the quiet Fanny Price and Anne Elliot hold their own when defending their principles. Thus, even in this early novel, Austen gently reshapes the boundaries of appropriate female behavior. Catherine violates multiple markers of womanhood, failing to perform and discern between social performance and deliberate deception. However, with the exception of her willingness to imagine General Tilney capable of killing his wife, Catherine’s conduct is largely above reproach. She is not a flirt, a fortune-hunter, a bad friend, an unkind person. She remains at all times a well-behaved young lady, so that her lapses in journaling and gardening, and her ready ability to contradict men, matters little. Without knowing it, Catherine is performing the role of a transgressive yet appropriate woman.
Ignorant of performance of any kind, she seems to trust every person she encounters. She falls under Isabella’s spell immediately and takes the older girl’s words as literal truth, failing to recognize the frequent disconnect between Isabella’s words and actions. For example, after becoming convinced that she is being stared at by two young men in the Pump Room, Isabella commands Catherine to keep watch while she examines the arrivals book. Catherine believes that her friend wishes to avoid the men and reports their departure with relief:

In a few moments Catherine, with unaffected pleasure, assured her that she need not be longer uneasy, as the gentlemen had just left the Pump-room.

“And which way are they gone?” said Isabella, turning hastily round. “One was a very good-looking young man.”

“They went towards the church-yard.”

“Well, I am amazingly glad I have got rid of them! And now, what say you to going to Edgar’s Buildings with me, and looking at my new hat? You said you should like to see it.”

Catherine readily agreed. “Only,” she added, “perhaps we may overtake the two young men.”

“Oh! Never mind that. If we make haste, we shall pass by them presently, and I am dying to shew you my hat.”

“But if we only wait a few minutes, there will be no danger of our seeing them at all.”

(n.pag.)

It never occurs to Catherine, even when Isabella admits that one of the young men was attractive,
that Isabella has been feigning disinterest and would in fact love to be approached and flattered. The distinction between the two girls is drawn clearly: Catherine speaks with “unaffected pleasure” and Isabella, protesting that she has no desire to encounter the men, commandeers Catherine, and the narrator reports that the pair “set off immediately as fast as they could walk, in pursuit of the two young men” (n.pag.). Catherine is not performing, and Isabella is. But Catherine does not recognize the discrepancy.

Isabella’s flirtatious behavior with the elder Tilney brother, Frederick, catches Catherine’s attention, however, and she begins to question her friend’s propriety. Catherine is amazed that Isabella tolerates Captain Tilney’s attentions, and she believes that Isabella must be ignorant of the pain she is causing her betrothed, Catherine’s brother James. She cannot accuse her friend of deliberate bad behavior. Although Catherine often requires guidance in matters of expected female conduct, she clearly realizes that Isabella’s coquetry is unacceptable—not because it risks making her a less respectable woman, but because it wounds James. Catherine is less concerned with the rules of society than she is with the people who inhabit it.

Only after Isabella has been pronounced as knowingly false through the testament of James does Catherine understand the extent to which she and James have been deceived. Neither Henry nor Eleanor seem terribly surprised by the turn of events, and they easily predict the quick cessation of Isabella’s attachment to their brother. Henry flatly names her a fortune-hunter when he counters Catherine’s timid optimism that Isabella might prove faithful now she has the man she really wants, saying, “I am afraid she will be very constant, unless a baronet should come in her way” (n.pag.). With indisputable evidence from James, the opinions of Henry and Eleanor,
and the absence of a letter from the Captain announcing his engagement to the fair Miss Thorpe, Catherine reads a surprise letter from Isabella with new eyes: “Its inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood struck her from the very first. She was ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her” (n.pag.). Like Marianne, Catherine had misdirected her faith. Catherine is aware only of her role as a reader of books and as a Gothic heroine, not of her role as a woman, a performer, and a reader of people. Although she is aware of how she should act in certain situations, she does not consider that other people might be playing parts as well, especially in what seem to her to be the perfectly ordinary environs of Bath.  

When not loosing her imagination on Gothic intrigue, Catherine is a very pragmatic creature. She tends to follow her own emotions and speak plainly; she expects no less from everyone else. She naturally trusted Isabella, her friend, and even though she dislikes General Tilney, she takes everything he says at face value. She is consistently oblivious to his hints about her connection to the Allens and her future with Henry. When discussing the Isabella situation with Henry and Eleanor, she insists that the General would not object to his oldest son marrying Isabella even though she has no fortune, reporting to the gently skeptical siblings, “He told me the other day that he only valued money as it allowed him to promote the happiness of his

---

61 It is only when Catherine sees General Tilney in Northanger Abbey that she begins to suspect him. Her judgment is affected not just by the man, but by the setting and the situation—recognizing her surroundings as those described in her novels, she easily assumes the role of heroine and casts the abbey’s inhabitants in the parts appropriate to the text she understands. General Tilney naturally becomes the villain and his dead wife a long-suffering and ultimately murdered tragic figure. It is entirely possible that, had the family repaired to a sunny townhouse in London, the patriarch’s reputation would have remained unblemished.

62 Unknown to Catherine and readers, Isabella’s brother John has informed General Tilney that Catherine will inherit Mr. Allen’s fortune, as he and his wife have no children. This erroneous report, disclosed in the novel’s final pages, retroactively explains the General’s careful attention to Catherine and his approval of her match with Henry. When John corrects his initial report with an equally untrue account of the penniless and avaricious Morland family, the General orders Catherine’s speedy removal from the abbey and forbids his children to have any further contact with her, an edict they both disobey immediately, Eleanor by begging a letter upon Catherine’s safe arrival home, and Henry by hastening there himself and asking for her hand in marriage.
children” (n.pag.). She thinks him a disagreeable man and is frequently intimidated by him, but nonetheless, she believes his every word is true and literal.

Catherine ponders the mystery of deceptive words further when a visit to Henry’s establishment at Woodston has been arranged. General Tilney says that Henry should go to no trouble for his guests, promising, “Whatever you may happen to have in the house will be enough” (n.pag.). Despite this assurance, Henry shortens his stay at the abbey to hasten home and make preparations. Catherine’s efforts to make him trust his father’s words are ineffective, and he departs, leaving her to muse upon “the inexplicability of the General’s conduct”:

That he was very particular in his eating, she had, by her own unassisted observation, already discovered; but why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?

Who but Henry could have been aware of what his father was at? (n.pag.)

Catherine’s woeful complaint questioning how people were to be understood is echoed throughout eighteenth-century writing. Plays, novels, and conduct manuals strove valiantly to provide an answer, as does Henry throughout Northanger Abbey. He continually recommends or guesses behavior, suggesting that if a young lady is to be understood, she should keep a journal, keep her imagination in check, and react a certain way to a friend’s betrayal. As discussed above, Catherine fails to conform to these niceties, both before and after Henry tells her about them. She maintains her independent spirit throughout, and even though she does not engage in the extreme performative contortions of the cross-dressing and masked heroines in Hannah Cowley’s plays, she is a model of respectable rebellion. Cowley’s women, such proficient performers themselves,
need no coaching in order to recognize the performances of others.

Catherine, like Marianne Dashwood, is limited by the specific fictions she reads, Gothic and sensibility novels respectively. They are unable to interpret the worlds outside the parameters delineated in the books. As Claudia L. Johnson points out, “the danger for a reader like Catherine is to mistake gothic exaggerations for unmediated representation, to fail to recognize their conventional trappings...Catherine imagines that no more or less than the literal imprisonment and murder of an unhappy wife is the only crime a bad man can be charged with” (35). Believing the people around them to be playing certain roles, they are thrown into confusion when deviations occur. Isabella’s final letter to Catherine differs little from the conversations the two young ladies had during their acquaintance in Bath, but Catherine misreads the earlier conversations as lively and honest—such as the scene involving the two young men that Isabella claims to want to get away from, even as she chases after them. The inconsistency then was no less striking than those Catherine identifies in the letter. By the time she reads the letter, however, Catherine has more information and for the first time, reads Isabella accurately.

Both Catherine and Marianne struggle to discern malevolent deception from social performance, and Johnson suggests that Austen was writing *Northanger Abbey* to an audience “not only able but also inclined to read their novels and their societies with critical detachment” (48), indicating an anxiety about the ways in which society functioned. General Tilney and Isabella are concerned primarily with economics: the General chooses Catherine as a suitable mate for Henry because of her imagined inheritance, and Isabella shifts her attention from the moderately-situated James Morland to Captain Tilney, a man with better prospects, and as Henry
commented, she is likely to change her mind should a baronet cross her path. Linked to both of these motivations, and to Catherine’s progress through the novel, is the issue of gender; women are inseparable from economics here. Catherine’s sole worth to General Tilney is her monetary value as decided by the Allens’ fortune. Indeed, the General assesses his own daughter in similar terms: “never had the General loved his daughter so well in all her hours of companionship, utility, and patient endurance as when he first hailed her ‘Your Ladyship!’” (n.pag.). To him, women are a commodity to be judged on title and estate, not on character.

Isabella, as Henry and Eleanor make clear, is at a distinct disadvantage when her worth is calculated in financial terms. She is aware of this, and her logic in pursuing a man like Captain Tilney was probably that a man of his position possessed enough rank and money for the both of them and all she need bring to the match was a pretty smile and excellent entertaining skills. When her gamble doesn’t pay off, she tries to return to the small but secure life James could have offered—his attachment seems so sincere that her lack of fortune mattered not at all. Although conduct books advised against marrying for money and recommended that choice be governed by mutual regard and affection, many of Austen’s female characters demonstrate that the matter is more complicated and multi-dimensional. The theme permeates *Mansfield Park*; Emma takes complacent satisfaction in the knowledge that her own fortune makes marriage unnecessary and truly optional; and it is certainly not esteem that drives Charlotte Lucas to accept Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*:

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small
fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.

(n.pag.)

The critique of women’s position in society is pointed: a woman of small fortune must marry or suffer poverty. It is almost possible to feel sorry for Isabella, knowing how limited her options are. Although she is a thoroughly unlikeable character, and readers are just as relieved as Catherine that James has been spared the unhappiness of a life in her company, her situation is pitiable. Isabella has all the requisite social charms of a marriageable young lady, but without the money, her prospects are few. The ideal woman is thus identifiable not by her behavior alone, but also her bankbook.

Austen’s heroines assert that a new model of womanhood should and could trump economic considerations. Emma alone is possessed of a substantial fortune, and she marries a man of equal standing, so there can be no doubt that they marry for love alone. Every other woman—Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, Catherine Morland, and Anne Elliot—is loved for herself, not for her estate, and the men they marry are also beloved by them, regardless of the size of their estate.

Even as Austen provides her heroines with husbands who are, for the most part, worthy of their spirit and intelligence, she points out the performances they engage in en route to the altar, and as noted above, she reminds readers of the limited roles available to women. Austen’s characters participate in the repetition of acts that make them women, but they rarely do so
unknowingly. Whether they are following the guidelines of sensibility or the Gothic, they are consciously casting themselves in a particular part and playing it to the best of their ability. At the same time, they work to exert greater control over the scripts of womanhood in which they were bound.

********

Although only the Dashwood sisters and Catherine have been discussed here, they are not uncommon among Austen’s women. They each use performance techniques borrowed from the theatre and everyday life to adjust the outlines of the female ideal without shattering it. They question the status of women by speaking their minds and by being decisive (even if the choices are not always wise), and they learn from their mistakes. While they make no effort to usurp male authority, they prove themselves equally capable, well-spoken, and intelligent, implying that roles men and women play are social creations, not naturally endowed divisions after all.

Indeed, as Judith Butler observes, “Sexual difference...is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices” (Bodies That Matter, n.pag.). Gender, according to Butler, is established through repeated performances of certain acts (“Performative Acts,” 270). Austen’s women carry out the performative acts that establish their gender, but by admitting that these actions are performances, they question the necessity of doing them.

Austen thus builds on and extends the work playwrights like Hannah Cowley had been doing, demonstrating a strong link between the two mediums and a similar commitment to eking
out new territory for women as the social and economic landscape shifted. The narrator in *Northanger Abbey* famously describes novels as “work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (n.pag.). The defense of her medium also allows Austen to claim its power: Her novel, it is implied, displays a “thorough knowledge of human nature,” and her characters enact its beauty and its absurdity. She might conclude each book with a felicitous marriage, but she points out the unhappy ones as well, critiquing both the women who made poor choices and the society that forced them to do so.

---

63 Penny Gay makes a connection between the epilogue from Cowley’s *The Belle’s Stratagem* and Austen’s work. Cowley’s piece includes the claim that “Here, only, on the Stage, / You see us as we are: *Here* trust your eyes,” and Gay observes, “The social world, the parade of gentility that Austen represents in her novels, operates with a particularly large set of obviously coded, that is, ‘theatrical’, behaviours, in dress, deportment, and etiquette. Like Cowley’s epilogue-speaker, Austen looks *from* the stage of her public art *at* her society, the consumers of that art which mirrors themselves” (23).
Conclusion

England in the eighteenth century was, of course, neither the first nor the last society to exert social controls over women. But it was a time of great change in almost every element of culture, and women figured prominently in the creation of a new form of expression and participated in the public sphere in significant ways. The tightening rules clearly indicates that the male establishment was threatened by the increasing visibility and viability of women—harmless things are ignored, but dangerous things are controlled.

Women writers in particular found ways to resist rules they didn’t like. Some lived in flagrant disregard of propriety, such as Eliza Haywood and Mary Wollstonecraft. Others concealed their ambition behind necessity—Hannah Cowley insisted she wrote plays only to feed her children—and others, like Jane Austen, attempted to remain anonymous. None of the writers or characters discussed in these pages have been truly dangerous. There have been no prostitutes, pirates, or thieves. The heroines here could all be imagined assembling politely to take tea together. Modestly, as befitting a proper young lady, they would demur any praise of their cunning or forthright speech. Pointedly, they might gesture to their wedding rings, to their lack of legal rights, to their corsets. Much ado, quips Catherine, who has done her reading, about nothing.

And for the better part of two centuries, history has agreed with her. Over the last forty or so years, there has been a growing awareness that there were in fact women doing more than cooking, cleaning, bearing children, and posing for portraits throughout the ages. Admitting
women into the discussion of art and the written word expands knowledge of society as a whole. Reading advice literature, novels, and plays provides insight into what women were warned against and what threats they were perceived to wield. Looking at all three genres in concert helps elucidate too the ways women communicated with each other, as though through a secret language or code. Few of the heroines examined here declare themselves as role models for a new kind of woman. They are mindful of male authority. But whether in the theatre, in a novel, or in a conduct book, they provide examples of performance. Once the rules have been learned, they indicate, women can move around within them, nudging gently, almost imperceptibly, as they pursue what they really want.

Significantly, what the women wanted was always sanctioned by society—Elizabeth did not suggest to Darcy that they try living together first, just to make sure they were really compatible. The slippery steps toward an assertive female agenda discussed in the preceding pages did not by themselves lead to revolutionary changes. They are, however, markers along the long path of women’s progress toward equality. In the pages of books and plays, women could carve out a sacred space for themselves, places to discuss issues that were important to them. They could carry on long-distance and time-traveling conversations. Conduct manuals could recommend young ladies peruse *The Female Quixote*—a novel—as a warning against reading novels. Jane Austen could defend Fanny Burney. Hannah Cowley could ask her audience to examine the truths of their own lives. So many voices talking to each other could not be ignored and could not be drowned out. Examining the connections between theatre, novels, and conduct

---

64 It would be nice to see theatres look beyond Goldsmith and Sheridan to explore Cowley and Inchbald, but that is another battle for another day.
manuals as a circular conduit rather than one-sided dictations deepens our understanding of the
time they represent in their pages, contextualizing their messages and revealing the multitude of
roles women performed, the cues they took and gave, and the sober but inspiring legacy they
leave.
Works Cited


Cockle, Mrs. *Important Studies, for the Female Sex, in Reference to Modern Manners; addressed to a Young Lady of Distinction*. London, 1809. Print.


*The Female Mentor, or Select Conversations*, London, 1793. Print.


*Love and Avarice: Or, The Fatal Effects of Preferring Wealth to Beauty. Exemplified in the History of a Young Gentleman of Fortune and Two Ladies, to both of whom he was married; to the first for Love, and to the other for her Money; and the unhappy Consequences the Knowledge of it produc'd. By A Lady of Shropshire*. London, 1748. Print.


*The Science of Love or The whole art of Courtship Made familiar to every Capacity. Containing Love-letters, Pleasing conversations, Poems & Songs. To which is added An Appendix*


