

96 | playing for all in the city: women's drama

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abstract

English women's drama was crucially shaped by the city between 1660 and 1705, the period when female actors and playwrights first entered the professional theatre. This article uses selected scenes from the comedies of Elizabeth Polwhele, Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre to examine how women coped with the high-risk strategy of participating in commercial theatre and the vast circulation of trade which grew up around the City, a flamboyant sign of high capitalism. On one hand, the city represents movement, a crossroads of possibilities in which to redefine female agency. In plays such as *The Rover*, *The Frolicks* and *The Gamester*, female dramatists script movement across the city in a way that pre-empts De Certeau's model of 'walking the city' as a way for female characters and actors to inhabit public spaces of their own. On the other hand, scenes in these plays critically interrogate Raymond Williams' classic distinction between discursive constructions of the city and the countryside in which the city's blatant expose of social and economic processes is associated with dirt. The contaminating pollution is feminised in the trope of actress, playwright and whore. Actresses and playwrights were 'playing for all' in more than one sense, and gambling exemplifies the risks involved for women attempting to manipulate the urban and theatrical locations that attempted to commodify them.

keywords

urban living; seventeenth-century women's drama; Restoration theatre; actress; consumer culture

Raymond Williams introductory remarks to *The Country and The City* acknowledge a tangible 'sense of possibility, of meeting and of movement' represented by cities, which conjure very different feelings from country fields 'that generations of my own people have cleared and set in hedges' (Williams, 1975: 6). His sense of excitement is anticipated, some 300 years earlier, by Lady Meanwell, a character in Elizabeth Polwhele's play *The Frolics* (circa 1670), who declares 'There is no Elysium but this London', and goes on to observe that only fools 'forsake this soul-charming city for the dirty, melancholy country' (Polwhele, 1977: 1.45–1.50). Madam Malateste in Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* (1668) agrees with her, telling the Steward of her husband's estate 'I would have you take me a fine house in the City: for I intend to live there, and not in this dull place' (Cavendish, 1668: 357). Both characters regard the city as a place of spectacle, pleasure and opportunity in contrast to rural environments that are essentially conservative, dirty and dull. What did the city represent for seventeenth-century female characters, female performers and playwrights? What difference did gender make to the sense of possibility, or meeting and of movement offered by urban spaces? My article will sketch answers to these questions by outlining broad arguments about urban playing spaces and exploring how women were placed therein with reference to a range of female-authored plays. Close analysis of selected scenes by Elizabeth Polwhele (circa 1669–1670), Aphra Behn (circa 1640–1689) and Susanna Centlivre (circa 1669–1723) will serve to illustrate and elaborate these points.

In the case of female dramatists and actors, London's immediate appeal after 1660 was novelty. Before this time women's drama in Britain had been produced for non-commercial venues such as the great house and garden, the school or convent, or the court.¹ In 1660, women looked back to a theatre history that was thus fenced and contained, just as Williams imagined the fields carefully cleared and set with hedges by 'generations of my own people'. In post-Restoration London, women's entry onto the professional stage as actresses or writers was effectively an entrance into the public world of the city. We should not read the move into professional theatre simply as a narrative of progress, though. Although the playing spaces previously available for women's dramatic productions were 'private' in that spectators were invited, those audiences were often large and prestigious. It was commercialisation that made the biggest difference to how women's drama functioned in the public theatres of the city. The commercialised environment made very different demands on female performers and dramatists. Geographer Robert Slack (1988) cogently observes that, once commercialised, a place loses its unique set of attributes and tends to model itself in terms of its competitors as like them and distinctive from them. Actresses and playwrights were obliged to work in a competitive environment alongside each other and male practitioners, both in the theatre and in the wider marketplace to earn their livings in London. They had to operate under the aegis

1 See Alison Findlay *et al.*, *Women and Dramatic Production 1550–1700* (Pearson, 2000) and Alison Findlay, *Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama* (Cambridge, 2006) for a survey of this theatre history and analysis of the different characteristics of these performance venues.

of male proprietors in the two licensed theatrical companies: the Duke's Company managed by Thomas Killigrew and the King's Company directed by William Davenant until 1668, and thereafter managed by Betterton and Harris under the administrative direction of Lady Davenant. Lady Davenant continued to hold the controlling interest in the company until she retired in 1673 and may have encouraged the work of actresses and the emergence of female playwrights at this time (Pearson, 1988: 32).

In addition to the commercial risks of professional theatre, women dramatists and actors put their cultural identities at risk by presenting themselves as public, paid women. Prologues and meta-theatrical references draw attention to the commodification of actresses and dramatists and their kinship with the figure of the prostitute. Catherine Gallagher has argued the 'the dramatic masking of the prostitute and the stagey masking of the playwright's interest in money are exactly parallel cases of theatrical unmasking', which show that 'the playwright is a whore' (Gallagher, 1999: 15). The risk of public censure (of the play and of its author) meant that the commercial stage was not an attractive arena for all women writers. Anne Finch's 'Advertisement' to her published writings expressly forbade performance: 'Having seen (out of the love of novelty) many Plays brought upon the stage', she refuses to subject her texts to the 'same fate of being expos'd, Censur'd and condemn'd'. Marta Straznicky points out that, for Finch, printing was a much safer mode of publication than trial by performance in the unforgiving market place of the professional theatre (Straznicky, 2004: 95–97).

Beyond the theatre, the urban arena was a disorienting environment as much then as now. Robert Schneider has argued for a similarity between postmodern and early modern urban culture: 'To turn from the postmodern to the early modern urban experience', he says, 'is to appreciate how change, novelty, endless variety, spatial fragmentation, exurban expansion, rapid social mobility, economic dislocation, massive in-migration, demographic fluctuation ... the cacophony of tongues and the collision of cultures characterize city life then, too' (Schneider, 2000: 1669–1670). This was especially true of London after the Great Fire of 1666 which had physically and symbolically ripped out the heart of the city by destroying much of the medieval City, its economic and traditional centre. Reactions to the disaster were schizophrenic, exemplifying contradictory views of the city by seventeenth-century residents. Lewis Mumford's classic study of the city points out that it caters for the two opposite impulses in human life: movement and settlement, one potentially liberating and the other conservative (Mumford, 1961: 5). Responses to the Great Fire demonstrated the paradoxical pull between movement and settlement. It was lamented as a tragedy, but it was also welcomed as an opportunity to re-make the metropolis along continental lines. It is perhaps no accident that women's professional drama began to emerge just after the Great Fire had cleared a space, both physically and

metaphorically, for the new. Katherine Philips's translation of Corneille's *Horace* transferred from court to the King's Theatre in 1669 and was followed by Frances Boothby's original script *Marcellia* (1669). Elizabeth Polwhele's comedy *The Frolicks* (circa 1670) was probably also written for the King's Company. The rival Duke's company staged Polwhele's tragedy *The Faithfull Virgins* (circa 1669) and Behn's first play *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670). Changes to the city landscape were probably just as important as Lady Davenant's influence over the Duke's Company in clearing the way for female-authored plays.

Cynthia Wall argues that cultural responses to the void created by the Great Fire followed a pattern of recuperation and innovation to manage the lack. Schemes for redrawing the city proposed by Evelyn and Newcourt attempted to reorganise urban space along classical, geometric lines as a means of establishing social order (Wall, 1998: 35). This would have been the seventeenth century equivalent of urban renaissance that Christine Boyer has called the postmodern 'figured city' in which grids of carefully designed streets and architectural and scenic effects are constructed to offer an illusion of publicly owned, refined space which is set off against the disfigured city (Boyer, 1995: 105). Any plan to renew seventeenth-century London along such figured lines was pre-empted by the urgent practicalities of resettlement. The area devastated by the Great Fire was rebuilt piecemeal, recreating the disorderly pattern of the old medieval City with its winding streets and alleyways and thus making the city centre a somewhat chaotic labyrinth (Wall, 1998: 44–53).

Women's desire to move freely through the city and settle there as professional writers was ideally served by the post-Fire environment of fragmented recuperation and innovation. On one side, writers and performers necessarily paid due respect to the conservative traditions of the City and the two licensed theatre companies which were closely connected to the masculine world of the Court. The City continued to define itself in rigidly masculine terms. *The Case of the City of London* (1692), for example, proclaimed 'the City of London is a Body Politick, by Prescription, and many Charters', composed of Freemen who have 'Power to make Bye-Laws for their own better Government and Advantage'. Those who were not 'Members of the said Body' – women, immigrants from the country or abroad – were 'nevertheless Bound' to its constitution as residents. Here the City is rhetorically constructed as a classical *male* body with clear lines, rules and boundaries between inside and outside. It defines itself implicitly in opposition to the 'leaky vessel', the typical definition of the female body which, ironically, modelled the material reality of the City's chaotic winding streets far more closely. Donatella Mazzoleni's theorisation of the city usefully notes the tensions between a static masculine construction of the city and the potential for disruption offered by a feminised alternative:

The city (that is to say the organism of collective life produced by the pre-industrial culture of the habitat) is still a *part*, the extroverted part, the *outside* of the body. Urban

construction is a solidification of space experienced in wide ranging social relationships: relationships activated concretely by the body, because the dynamics of urban exchanges operate completely on the scale of the movements of individual bodies in locomotion ... We can speak of a city as long as the totality of those who produce and live a collective construction constitute a collective anthropoid body, which maintains in some way an identity as a 'subject'. The city is therefore a site of an *identification*.

(Mazzoleni, 1993: 293)

What happens when those individual bodies in locomotion within the city act in such a way as to challenge the collective construction or threaten the male-centred constitution of the collective anthropoid body? After the Great Fire, male and female-authored comedies offer striking examples of women acting with the appearance of agency that threatens to de-centre patriarchal re-constitutions of the city. Earlier plays like Elizabeth Polwhele's *The Frolicks* (circa 1670), Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing Master* (1673) and *The Country Wife* (1676), Behn's *The Rover* (1677) all include strong female characters who claim control of the city environment in differing ways. In evaluating the freedom of movement enjoyed by female characters, actors and authors, we need to remain conscious of the city and its theatres as a market place whose opportunities for exchange and change were driven by consumption.

Research on the postmodern city identifies the importance of entertainment and leisure industries in urban renaissance (Griffiths, 1995). The King's and the Duke's Companies, with close alliances to the fashionable world of the Court, were, arguably, just as important 'arenas for symbolization, bases for new, reflexive forms of consumption and cultural production' (Ash and Graham, 1997: 414) in post-Restoration London. Following his personal restoration, Charles II had engaged actively in public activities, including licensing professional playing companies and going to the theatre. His strategy blurred boundaries between the Court and the rest of the city, most literally in opening royal pleasure grounds like St. James's Park, Hyde Park and Spring Gardens, to the public, thus creating a fashionable new west-end: the Town (Backscheider, 1993: 1–31; Dillon, 2006: 4). After the Great Fire of London, the theatres (which were undamaged) were ideally placed as bases for self-reflexive forms of cultural production and urban restoration. Opportunities to write or perform there gave women new opportunities to reshape the city after their own image. An anonymous poem on the Dorset Garden Theatre, which opened in November 1671 on the bank of the Thames, celebrates theatre's cultural power in London:

Where gentle *Thames* thro' stately Channels glides,
And *England's* proud Metropolis divides,
A lofty Fabrick does the Sight invade,
And stretches o'er the Waves a pompous Shade ...
Here thrifty Rich hires Heroes by the Day,

And keeps his Mercenary Kings in Pay:
With deep-mouth'd Actors fills the vacant Scenes,
And rakes the Stews for Goddesses and Queens.
Here the lewd Punk, with Crowns and Scepters grac'd,
Teaches her Eyes a more Majestick Cast ... (Avery, 1964: 122)

The theatre, like the river, cuts through the centre of the flourishing 'proud Metropolis'. Although the city's commerce, which comes from the river, is magnificent, the theatre rises above and casts a pompous shade over such commercial activities. It represents them with knowing satirical or critical distance. Christopher Rich ('thrifty Rich'), the lawyer who eventually took control of the Duke's Company for profit, can transform actors into kings, queens and goddesses, and then command them. As well as advertising the new status and power of the merchant classes, the lines pay particular attention to the popular idea that actresses were like whores, drawn from the stews or brothels. The actress or the female playwright displays and sells her wares to the paying public. Like men in the theatre, she gains a temporary power to command from the city stage but at what cost?

Leslie Kern's analysis of twenty-first century regeneration in Toronto draws attention to some disturbing aspects of female empowerment in the neo-liberal city, which helps to illuminate the precarious position occupied by women in the Restoration theatre, and demonstrates common ground between seventeenth-century women and contemporary readers. Kern shows that advertisements promoting inner-city condominium developments construct 'a feminised and eroticised vision of revitalisation' through which women are encouraged to identify with the sexy city and reclaim it and its pleasures of consumption in/as a place of their own. The terms freedom, liberty and victory in adverts such as that for Victory Condominiums actively promote downtown city living as 'a victory for women' (Kern, 2010: 217).

The female prologue, or advertisement, to Aphra Behn's first play *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670) appeals to spectators in strikingly similar terms:

Can any see this glorious sight and say
A Woman shall not Victor prove to day:
Who is't that to their Beauty wou'd submit
And yet refuse the fetters of their Wit? (Behn, 1996a: lines 43–46)

The actress presents herself and her author's text in seductively attractive terms to men and women consumers although her image of female beauty is probably more rounded than the fashionably thin twenty-first century models in Toronto. Kern points out that such advertising strategies (which feature white, able-bodied figures) commodify women while appearing to make them feel welcome

and powerful. In advertising the '*glorious sight*' of female '*Beauty*' as a site of victory and empowerment, the adverts from both periods can also function more dangerously. They constitute a challenge to male consumers who are invited to desire and even 'take possession of' the feminised city. Women condominium-owners interviewed by Kern recounted how they accommodated themselves to the risks and even commodified fear and danger as 'desirable qualities of urban living'. She concludes that the neo-liberal city which objectifies women in its promotion of consumption, and provides safe spaces for them via private security, perversely 'appears to breathe new life into patriarchal urban social structures' (Kern, 2010: 225).

Post-Restoration city drama often functions in similarly conservative ways beneath a liberal spectacle that welcomes all consumers to the theatre. The fourteen-year old Hippolyta in Wycherley's *Gentlemen Dancing Master* (1673) wittily controls the romantic plot but remains imprisoned inside her father's house, guarded by her aunt Mrs Caution, like a condominium dweller confined by fear to the safe-keeping of the concierge. She longs to 'eat a Sillybub in new Spring-garden' or to 'drink a pint of Wine' with a friend in a public house but cannot venture forth (Wycherley, 1673: 1–2). Aphra Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) dramatises in scenes of broad farce Sir Patient's futile attempt to contain women's desires within the walls of his Puritan city household. Lady Fidget, Mrs Dainty Fidget and Mrs Squeamish are consumed by their voracious desire for china and sex in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1676). The eponymous heroine remains ignorant of how she is displayed and exchanged between men as she cross-dresses to escape confinement and sample the pleasures of the city. Kern's interviewees, while conscious of danger, did not express any reservations about the culture of consumption into which they had bought. Behn's drama, however, offers numerous self-reflexive comments on the cultures of commodification and fear which threaten to limit women's freedom in the city. The Prologue to *The Forc'd Marriage* reverses the usual notion of female imprisonment to warn spectators that, whatever the plot, they will be unable to escape the '*fetters*' of women's wit that will oblige them to reassess the position of women on stage and in the urban spaces beyond. I will go on to explore the success with which city comedies by Aphra Behn, Elizabeth Polwhele and Susanna Centlivre use female wit to negotiate the changing market economy in which they, their heroines and the actresses operate. By suggesting that their interventions in the commercial theatre constitute a means to challenge gendered norms, I propose that these scripts speak to current feminist aims to remake the city as a place where all women can participate in urban life.

Behn's plays explicitly advertise the packaging of woman as whore on the stage and in the city. In Act 2 of *The Rover* (1677), for example, the actress playing the courtesan Angellica is doubly framed by the on-stage curtains, the balcony and the picture hung as a sign outside which present her for sale in Venice.

Beyond this, the theatre stage presents her by gradually exposing her as a spectacle to paying customers at the Dorset Garden playhouse, whose proscenium arch frames her (Behn, 1990: 124–134). Like the images of women on condominium adverts, Angellica is presented as a wealthy, high-status figure, an icon of pleasure, prosperity and apparent control. However, the play's self-conscious representational technique shows how her agency is always limited by the physical and commercial frames in which character, actor and writer operate. *The Rover* advertises the dangers of the seductive feminised city more bluntly in the comic shaming of Blunt, Behn's satiric portrait of an archetypal solid Englishman. Blunt is charmed by the rich clothes, jewels and the furnishings of the exotic whore Lucetta, who teasingly asks 'Are you not undrest yet?'. Having undressed to join her in an alcove bed, he is horribly surprised when the bed disappears in the darkness and he falls through a trapdoor into the common sewer:

[The Scene changes and discovers Blunt creeping out of a Common Sewer, his Face & all dirty]

I am got out at last, and (which is a Miracle) without a Clue – and now to damning and cursing ... Well, I'll go home (if I can find the way) with this consolation, that I am not the first kind, believing Coxcomb. (Behn, 1990: 3.2.: 150–153)

Blunt's descent into the city sewer produces a complete loss of place. His final lines warn male spectators that any quest to map the city in exclusively masculine terms may be doomed to failure. The acquisitive desire to possess the feminised city as constructed through spectacular commodification leads down a long, dark tunnel to shame. In spite of her escape from Blunt, with the profits of his purse and clothes, Lucetta ultimately fares little better. Their exchange advertises what Raymond Williams defines as the classic distinction between discursive constructions of the city and the country. The city is associated with dirt because of its blatant exposé of social and economic processes. Pastoral constructions of the countryside, by contrast, *mask* these processes and displace them onto the city (Williams, 1975: 146–148). Dirt in the city, as a pollution of the classical masculine body politic, is defined as female. In Behn's play, Lucetta flamboyantly personifies the economic and social processes of exchange in the city. The geographical black hole of the sewer is a nightmarish metaphor for the whore, a woman of the streets who is apparently mistress of both private and public spaces but is ultimately confined by those identities. In her, Behn characterises the common association between woman playwright, actress and whore.

What freedom of movement does post-Fire city drama offer women then? Were women dramatists able to script movement across the city in ways that pre-empt De Certeau's model of 'walking the city', and shake up its commodifying models,

and in doing so opening up spaces for female agency? De Certeau suggests:

The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organisations, no matter how panoptic they may be; it is neither foreign to them (it can only take place within them) not in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. (De Certeau, 1984: 93)

Flaneuse characters in the plays of Polwhele, Behn and Centlivre, performed for the first time by actresses, dramatise women's historic encroachment onto a masculine practice: autonomous movement around the urban environment. As already noted, women characters, actresses and writers must walk within the city as part of the male-centred environment of professional drama, but their presence advertises an ability to inhabit a public space of their own (a public theatre and a city setting) in ways that create shadows and ambiguities in what was previously an all-male space. The most obvious cultural advantage that professional theatre offered to women is a legitimate entry into public space in which women's normally 'private' concerns can be aired and injustices exposed to public scrutiny. Juliet Blair points out that 'the normal distinctions between "private" and "public" are neither incumbent upon nor possible for the actress' and that 'her experience permits her to fuse the value systems, and to bring the naturally secluded private inter-personal sphere of women in the home in to the light of public scrutiny' (Blair, 1993: 200). The actress's job is to become a human database of female experience accumulated from the fictional roles she has played, spectators' responses, and the real-life experiences of herself and other women. A single actress becomes a 'host of informants on women' from the past and present, with the responsibility to speak for and speak to those women who do not have a public voice (Blair, 1993: 202). She has an important duty to marshal her emotions and acting skill to 'translate her knowledge of the hidden interior life, and to gain public recognition of its existence and importance' (Blair, 1993: 216). As a professional performer of women's parts, she can draw attention to the ways in which women off-stage are educated to perform a series of culturally approved roles and advertise other exciting possibilities in the performance of parts which go beyond what is conventionally acceptable behaviour for women. Female roles in the scripts of Polwhele, Behn and Centlivre offer actresses of the twenty-first century an opportunity and a responsibility to speak for women of the past. The occluded voices of women dramatists and performers and the female population of seventeenth-century London can be glimpsed through analysis and revived through performance. These scripts in turn, speak to women seeking to participate in the life of twenty-first century cities.²

The flaneuse who 'walks' the male-oriented metropolis as character, actress or writer, exemplifies Elizabeth Wilson's idea of woman as the 'sphinx' in the city, an 'irruption' which symbolises disorder. Wilson points out that, 'almost from the beginning, the presence of women in cities, and particularly in city streets, has

2 On the need to revive critical interest in Centlivre as an example of the early woman dramatist, see Bratton (2000).

been questioned, and the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life have always been directed particularly at women' (Wilson, 1991: 9, 14). While it is important to recognise the dangers of crossing public urban space for women either alone or in groups, it is also important to emphasise the pleasures and advantages it brings. Elizabeth Polwhele's lively comedy *The Frolicks* (circa 1670), written for the King's Company at Drury Lane, presents a remarkable picture of sexual equality on the streets of London, demonstrating how women dramatists celebrated the new-found freedom offered by the city.³

We know nothing about the playwright, Elizabeth Polwhele, beyond what she reveals in her dedication of the play to Prince Rupert where she fears 'I shall be taxed for writing a play so comical', but believes that her tragedy *The Faithfull Virgins* and a lost play 'my *Elysium*' will compensate. She presents herself as 'young, no scholar, and what I write I write by nature, not by art'. She may, as her modern editors propose, be the Elizabeth Polwhele born in Devon in 1651 (Polwhele, 1977: 44–46). However plausible her professions of youth and lack of learning, her supposed artlessness seems disingenuous in the light of the text that follows. *The Frolicks* is a tightly structured piece that reveals knowledge of the theatre and its personnel. It is set within 'the City' – the old City walls – a territory dominated by the paternal presence of Swallow, a rich lawyer, moneylender and Justice of the Peace. As well as being the father to the heroine, he functions as a symbolic City Father, a representative of the law and civic institutions. In contrast, Clarabell, the spirited heroine, is a street-wise 'figzick cockney' (Polwhele, 1977: 2.107). Clarabell's 'frolic' involves a fairly transparent physical dissimulation: to 'turn boy for an hour or two' by cross-dressing as her cousin Philario (Polwhele, 1977: 2.543–2.545). Her disguise releases her from her father's house onto the streets where she can pursue her beloved, the rake Rightwit, and her project to reform him. The public spaces of London into which Clarabell moves contrast favourably with the domestic spaces of the sub-plot to which the country wife, Lady Meanwell, is confined. She and her sister are set up by a bawd, Procreate, to please the sexual appetites of Sir Francis Makelove and Lord Courtall. The security of indoors is an illusion; literally so in the theatre where Lady Meanwell and Faith and the actresses who personate them are exposed to the gaze of paying spectators.

The play suggests that Clarabell's tactic, to grasp an identity in the public spaces of London and grapple there with the problems it presents, is safer and more liberating than confinement to the home. The street and tavern scenes are designed to be played on the open forestage intercutting with the sub-plot's use of the upstage area. In Act 2 the rake Rightwit attempts to set up a match between his sister Leonora and Sir Gregory or Zany, two foolish but wealthy suitors to Clarabell. Leonora's freedom to enter the tavern allows her to make a decisive intervention in her future by openly rejecting the suitors, a way out that is not available to the women trapped in the private domestic scenes. The streets

3 There is no record of the performance of *The Frolicks*, but Polwhele's dedication to Prince Rupert, who was a good friend of Killigrew, and whose mistress Margaret Hughes had been a member of the King's Company, suggests that this is the performance destination she imagined when composing the play.

and tavern are the kinds of everyday space identified by Zukin as the foundation of strong civic identity as 'primary sites of public culture' and the 'window into a city's soul' (Zukin, 1995: 260). Like any city comedy *The Frolicks* stages urban settings as both 'site and sight', or 'meeting place and social staging ground', to use Zukin's terms. In re-presenting the everyday on stage, it allows spectators to apprehend the city in ideological as well material terms: its receptivity to strangers, the opportunities it offers to enter a fully socialised life (Zukin, 1995: 260). Unlike male-authored scripts, *The Frolicks* pays more self-conscious attention to the gender-specific risks and rewards of operating in everyday public spaces.

Clarabell's movement through the city empowers her to control the erotic energy of the play and to harness the unattractive elements of rakish behaviour that inevitably limit female autonomy (a problem that Behn also tackles in the figure of Willmore in *The Rover*). The dangers of male desire are personified by Rightwit in *The Frolicks*, whom Clarabell out-manoeuvres with deft control of space. She is aided by three whores who confront Rightwit in the street demanding paternity payments (Polwhele, 1977: 4.135–4.151). Here, Polwhele rewrites a scene from James Howard's Italian mad-couple comedy *All Mistaken* (1672) where the rake Phillidor is assailed by three whores who have been bringing up his bastard children (Howard, 1672: 8–12). In Howard's text, the women are frightened away by the threat of a wolf and leave their bastard infants behind. Phillidor's celebration of his fertility (following on from Benedick's rakish boast that 'the world must be peopled', *Much Ado* 2.3.239), makes him confident that 'if all Trades Fail, I may go into some Forraine Plantation where they want people, and Be well paid for my pains' (Howard, 1672: 9). *The Frolicks* replays the rake's confidence with a nod to Charles II's sexual promiscuity:

He that one woman can satisfy
Is enemy to a nation,
Since he with a score may multiply
For its service, his generation. (Polwhele, 1977: 2.509–2.512)

In Polwhele's rewrite of the scene, however, the abused whores take matters into their own hands. Far from being frightened off stage, they forcibly restrain Rightwit and strap his bastard children to his back (Polwhele, 1977: 4.188–4.193).

Clarabell's free movement from setting to setting is enacted by the movement of a female body across the stage. However, her cross-dressing throughout the street and tavern scenes may seem to compromise her project of reclaiming the city for women. One plot motivation for this popular convention was for the heroine to pursue or test the man of her choice. *The Frolicks* is part of a dramatic tradition that looks back to Shakespeare and forward to texts like Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), D'Urfey's *The Marriage Hater Match'd* (1692), Granville's

The She-Gallants (1696), *Ariadne's She Ventures and He Wins* (1695) and Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706).⁴ In city settings, cross-dressing suggests that women must behave as men in order to enjoy freedom. Often it is conservative rather than challenging. For example, Margery Pinchwife's male disguise in *The Country Wife* does not question women's given roles at all. The practice is also politically conservative in the way it eroticises the female body of the actor. Far from shielding the actress, breeches roles served to expose her legs to the audience. Polwhele probably designed the role of Clarabell for Nell Gwyn who was celebrated for her performance of the breeches role opposite Charles Hart in the witty couple plays for which the King's Company were famous.

In *The Frolics*, the heroine's cross-dressing is not a disguise; it is a mask which gives her license to play and simultaneously control her erotic power over men. Polwhele utilises the figure of the actress as a magnet for desire in order to raise awareness of commodification and to suggest ways in which women can manage the dangers of traversing the city. The cross-dressed Clarabell claims ownership of the everyday space of the tavern and the theatrical arena of representation by making her two foolish suitors cross-dress as women to dance 'The Frolics' with her and Rightwit (Polwhele, 1977: 3.136). When she leaves them with the tavern bill but without their own clothes, they are arrested as 'lewd beasts in petticoats' who are 'not worthy to be styl'd women' (*ibid.*: 4.44). Here the character, playwright and actress deflect charges of lewdness back onto the men who commodify them. They simultaneously claim the right to self-representation. The theatrical tradition of transvestite performance of women's roles is literally defrocked as the actress claims the stage for herself.

Clarabell's romantic project to reform Rightwit involves having this potentially dangerous rake confined to prison. In contrast, she evades any paternal scheme to imprison her physically indoors like Lady Meanwell, or in an arranged marriage. The reversal of normal gendered positions is staged when she visits Rightwit and her cousin Philario who occupy the feminine position of stasis behind the prison bars:

RIGHTWIT What the Devil brought thee here?

CLARABELL Things call'd legs – with a willing mind. I thought a woman would have been welcome to you, but I perceive you know not what to do with one. Fare ye well.

RIGHTWIT Stay! I can cure thy greensickness yet, as low as the tide is.

(Polwhele, 1977: 4.351–4.355)

Here, Polwhele rewrites the serious prison scenes of Howard's *All Mistaken* (1672) as theatrical comedy. In spite of his assertions of sexual power, Rightwit is behind bars and so cannot cure her 'greensickness' (chlorosis) with an appropriate dose of sex. Knowing that the rake cannot touch her, Clarabell advertises the power of her legs as instruments of movement rather than objects of desire. They have the freedom to bring her there and take her away again according to her wishes, but his have none. She plays on the fact that he is

⁴ For a full discussion of female transvestites in plays by men and women, see Pearson (1988: 100–118).

certainly not 'free to venture' (Polwhele, 1977: 4.365), by suggesting that he does not know what to do with a woman. Polwhele's play shows the heroine taking control of the city setting and through it the stage whose male-dominated values threatened to imprison her. Her final challenge to Rightwit, that she will marry him only when he gets the good will of her father, implicitly asks for formal acceptance of women's liberty and equality on the part of the City Fathers.

By the end of the seventeenth century, women's awareness of the stakes involved in professional theatre production combined with an increased confidence in their ability to manipulate the professional stage to produce plots with high levels of risk. This dramatic form mirrored the economic and social culture of the capital. A love of gambling was a key sensibility of the age with a flourishing profusion of gaming houses and salon card games at which high stakes could be wagered. Susanna Centlivre's plays *The Basset-Table* (1705) and *The Gamester* (1705) both explore women's position in this high-risk environment, drawing parallels between gambling, forced marriage and trade to explore ideas of self-ownership and the female commodification (Pearson, 2000: 42).

In *The Basset-Table*, the gambling salon ruled over by Lady Reveller symbolises a city culture defined by its consumption of luxury goods. As the character Lady Lucy recognises, this is a woman-centred economy that subverts the homosocial model based on trade. The culture of consumption and gift-giving involves a lively circulation of luxury goods between the women around the table. Centlivre postpones the appearance of the basset table on stage until the final act, astutely raising the audience's expectations. It is revealed in the discovery space, 'framed' by Lady Lucy and Sir James's introductory discussion:

L. Lucy: Cards are harmless Bits of Paper in themselves, yet through them, what Mischiefs have been done! What Orphans wrong'd? What Tradesmen ruin'd! What Coaches and Equipage dismiss'd for them?

Sir Jam. But then, how many fine Coaches and Equipages have they set up, Madam?

L. Lucy. Is it the more honourable for that? How many Misses keep Coaches too? Which Arrogance in my Opinion only makes them more eminently scandalous ... Madam's Grandeur must be upheld – tho' the Baker and Butcher shut up Shop.

(Centlivre, 1872: 242–243)

This economy, based on consumption, is fragile. The ruin of the citizen's wife Mrs Sago from gambling, and the collapse of the basset table because of male plotting at the end of the play gives a clear warning to any female spectator wishing to speculate in the city.

Nevertheless, women's confidence on the city stages, and the city beyond, is clear by the time Centlivre is writing. A gambling scene from the companion play *The Gamester* (1705) demonstrates such confidence in controlling the city streets. Its heroine, the rich heiress Angelica, falls in love with the rake gambler Valere. On condition that he keeps his solemn vow that he will never gamble again, she

promises to marry him, offering him her picture, framed with diamonds. This provisional gift of herself is not as passive or conservative a gesture as it appears. Angelica, like many heroines before her, cross-dresses, enters the city streets and, outplays her male rivals, including Valere, at the gaming table. She makes him gamble the picture and wins it from him.

Angelica: Yet you shan't say I'm ungenerous – whate'er you value it at, I'll answer it.

Valere: Value it at – It is not to be valued.

Angelica: Then you'll not set it; Sir, your Servant.

Valere: Stay Sir – Luck may turn – I'll set the Diamonds at two hundred Guineas.

[*Angelica throws two or three Times and then wins it.*]

Angelica: 'Tis mine, Sir.

Box-K: Four, Trey, Ace; you owe me Three Boxes, Sir.

Valere: Eternal Furies – lost – He shall restore it, or I'll cut his throat. Well, Sir, take the Diamonds but I must have the Picture.

Angelica: The Picture, Sir.

Valere: Ay, the Picture, Sir.

Angelica: I won it Sir, and I shan't restore it. (Centlivre, 1872: 181)

The love-token symbolises Angelica herself, as material object and as emotional commitment. Regaining the picture is a form of self-possession and emotional self-control: not to lose her heart to a profligate who does not return her emotions, but to choose how and when to give it to a deserving partner. When she reveals her identity and restores the picture to achieve a 'happy' resolution of the play, the gambling metaphor still resonates in a more serious mood. Angelica has no guarantee that Valere will now reform or love her for herself in spite of his protestations. Centlivre demonstrates that marriage, no less than financial speculation, is a dangerous gamble, particularly for women. The gambling metaphor reminds us of the risk or gamble that seventeenth-century women took in entering the traditionally all-male space of the city or its theatres. By venturing onto the commercial, public stage, they were 'playing for all' in more than one sense.

The ways in which we read their texts from a presentist perspective may give us pause for thought as we evaluate the place of women in the neo-liberal, revitalised cities of the twenty-first century. A speech by Lucinda, the youngest woman in Mary Pix's *The Beau Defeated* (1700), makes the utopian suggestion that, by the turn into the eighteenth century, women claimed the city streets as a place of possibility with the same confidence as the condominium owners in twenty-first century Toronto. Lucinda explains that she has only agreed to run away with Sir John Roverhead to enjoy the freedom of the streets:

I run away only for more pleasure, more liberty, etc. I will go every day to the play, or else to the Park; and every time I go to the park, to the lodge, to Chelsea: in fine where I please,

or as I run away with you, I'll run away from you, sue for my own fortune again, and live as I please: what I have heard how ladies with fortunes do. (Pix, 1991: 223)

Lucinda sees London as a future of independence rather than dependence on a nobly born husband. Her words to Sir John outline an urban practice which challenges patriarchal systems outright. Spoken with the confidence of youth, her lines express a vision of what London might hold for women. Claiming the city and the city stage for herself makes both the character and the actress an important focal point for the expression of women's interests in urban life. At the same time, however, Lucinda's lines remind us of the complexities and dangers hedging any notion of female freedom in the city, either then or now. What is immediately apparent is that Lucinda's utopian urban landscape is still one of elitist consumption. Like the images of attractive, young, able-bodied women on the adverts in contemporary Toronto analysed by Leslie Kern, she is identified with the sexy city as consumer and consumable: subject and object of desire. What is more, her thirst for more experience of the city, more pleasure, more liberty, is only accessible to 'ladies with fortunes'. It is limited by class, just as the twenty-first century post-industrial city seems to offer *particular* women, who have the means to mitigate or manage the dangers of urban living, opportunities to become the subjects of the city. We need to recall the presence of the commodified, working actresses in the Dorset Garden Theatre to remind us of the exclusivity of that utopian vision. To perform it 'The lewd Punk, with Crowns and Scepters grac'd, / Teaches her Eyes a more Majestick Cast' (Avery, 1964: 122). The common woman must be gilded and empowered like a queen, even if the wealth is borrowed, in order to enjoy the liberty of the city. The actress surveys it confidently like the perfect images of young women on the condominium advertisements, but, on display like the city itself, she is always in danger of being defined as a punk, an object to be seized or bought. Dramatists, especially women playwrights, exploit the potential of the actress as heroine to command the urban setting and the city stage and use that dominant position to teach us to attend to the occluded differences of class, race and sexual difference if we are to produce a feminist reworking of the city. Only then can all share Lady Meanwell's view that 'There is no Elysium but this London' (Polwhele, 1977: 145).

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