

Secret lives of women who broke taboo to act in Shakespeare

They were rarities in Restoration theatre. But, as a new exhibition shows, the Bard's first actresses were brave pioneers



Great Elizabethan and Georgian stage stars, such as Will Kempe, Richard Burbage and David Garrick, may not be household names today, but their reputations live on in the theatre. What, though, of the actresses who appeared in the same companies? Their names, as well as their reputations, have mostly been forgotten.

Shakespeare's female roles were played by boys or young men until 1660, but new research by the British Library has uncovered details of the careers of the few, ground-breaking women who began to take on major Shakespearean characters in the face of the prejudice of their times.

Regarded as prostitutes or, at best, titillating diversions, these six or seven prominent actresses had to carve out places inside previously all-male companies. They also had to deal with wealthy male theatre-goers paying a little extra each night to watch them dress in the wings.

This month the London-based library will put on display its copy of a remarkable prologue, written to warn an audience that a real actress would appear that night as Desdemona

in *Othello*. Composed by the actor and poet Thomas Jordan in the winter of 1660, the prologue promises that the actress is “as far from being what you call a Whore, As Desdemona injur’d by the Moor”.

His words, initially spoken to an audience at the Vere Street theatre in Lincoln’s Inn, join other rare documents as a key part of a new exhibition, *Shakespeare in Ten Acts*, marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. Jordan’s prologue quickly underlines the sexual potency of the historic moment, while seeming to downplay it:

*“I come unknown to any of the rest,
to tell you news, I saw the Lady dress’t,
the woman playes to day, mistake me not,
No man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat,
A woman to my knowledge, yet I cann’t
(If I should dye) make affidavit on’t.”*

The British Library exhibition will also include an original copy of the 1662 royal proclamation that licensed women to appear again on the professional stage. All theatre had been banned by a Puritan ordinance of 1647, but in 1660 two performing companies, one run by William Davenant and another by Thomas Killigrew, were granted licences.

Two years later, Charles II, a fan of the theatre, had decreed “that all the women’s parts to be acted in either of the said two companies for the time to come may be portrayed by women”.

Margaret Hughes was one of the first actresses to enjoy a successful stage career. Photograph: Kean Collection/Getty Images

It was Killigrew’s company that staged a production of *Othello* that winter, and the exhibition’s lead curator, Zoë Wilcox, now believes she knows who took the lead female role, although a note later scrawled in the margin suggests it might have been a Mrs Morris. “There is very little written evidence, but we think it was actually a woman called Ann Marshall. That best fits the dates,” said Wilcox.

Marshall, also known as Mrs Quin, was a Restoration celebrity, as was her younger sister, Rebecca.

It had once been thought likely that this first female Desdemona was played by Margaret Hughes, the woman who would go on to join the original Theatre Royal company of Drury Lane and enjoy a successful stage career, along with the attentions of Prince Rupert, a cousin of Charles II.

Other early leading ladies of the era were Ann Barry and Mary Saunderson (or Mrs Betterton), the first woman to portray Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Lady Macbeth.

New Shakespearean actresses provoked strong reactions. On 3 January 1661, Pepys wrote of seeing Killigrew's King's Company putting on the play *The Beggars' Bush*: "The first time that ever I saw Women come upon the stage." For some years afterwards, these stars were seen as fair game for voyeuristic fans who relished a peep show element at the theatre.

The new exhibition features the pages of a journal called *The Female Tatler*, which bemoaned the trend for men to sit backstage at the theatre and watch the female performers get dressed, rather than watching the play.

Cross-dressing also caused a degree of sexual frisson among theatre-goers and prompted wider moralising in society. While petty criminal Moll Cutpurse (Mary Frith), the famous London "Roaring Girl" who regularly dressed as a man, was the subject of a popular play and appeared in person in a stage sketch to promote the show, she was later arrested for indecency.

Similarly, Edward Kynaston, a male "boy player" who had continued to play lead female roles, developed a huge following among men and women. "His rich female fans used to take him out for public carriage rides in the park dressed in full Shakespearean costume," said Wilcox.

Maxine Peake and Dame Harriet Walter, contemporary actresses who have played male Shakespearean roles in recent productions, are featured in video interviews. Both point to the gender fluidity that has always been celebrated in his plays.

"Obviously I was aware of the history of people playing Hamlet in the sort of Ellen Terry, Sarah Bernhardt times," said Walter, who played Brutus in *Julius Caesar* in an all-female production at the Donmar Warehouse in London.

"But there were lots more ... there were many more actresses playing male roles in history than we are aware of. So that again is a question: why hasn't that been written about more?"