LEGAL REGULATION OF WOMEN ON THE ENGLISH

RENAISSANCE STAGE 1558–1642

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The question of why women did not perform on the English Renaissance stage is an enduring one, which is yet to be properly answered. This article examines contemporary legislation and case law to illustrate the regulation of women’s performance throughout the Renaissance. The article engages in a reading of legislation, provides a textual analysis of court records - both the official narrative represented in the court transcripts and the social and political attitudes that underpinned the rulings - and links the law to the position of women and performers in the Renaissance social structure. The author contends that the laws adopted by judges and legislators were not arbitrary, but reinforced dominant concepts of gender, class and status in Renaissance society. It is argued that regulations operated to cast women performers as outsiders who were subject to male controls. The author offers an alternative reading of Renaissance women performers that expounds the diegetic and political possibilities of their performances, and significantly challenges the notion that the Renaissance theatre was an all-male stage.

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INTRODUCTION

“Every schoolchild knows that there were no women actors on the Elizabethan stage; the female parts were taken by young men actors. But every schoolchild also learns that this fact is of little consequence for the twentieth-century reader of Shakespeare’s plays. Because...it was accepted as “verisimilitude” by the Elizabethan audience, who simply disregarded it.”

The question of why women did not perform on the English Renaissance stage is an enduring one, which is yet to be properly answered. The English Renaissance was a significant period in theatrical history: the time of our greatest playwright William Shakespeare, and yet, though Shakespeare’s Cleopatra would rather die than watch “some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness”, she and all the great heroines were first played by young boy actors apprenticed to the major theatre troupes. By comparison, actresses were blossoming in other European jurisdictions. Women were playing in the Italian commedia dell’arte in the 1560s, actresses appeared in Spain in 1587, and a French troupe introduced actresses in 1598. England was thus unique in its absence of female performers on the main-stage. In explaining this absence, many writers have purported that a law banned women from performing on the stage, but no such law existed. This is despite the fact that female performance was regulated in the other European jurisdictions. Instead, a mix of legislation and local common law curtailed the presence of women on the English stage. This article shall ascertain what effect these laws had upon female performance in the English Renaissance and, in doing so, create a picture of female performance and the law in Renaissance England.

VAGRANCY LEGISLATION

Up until the dawn of the Renaissance, women were participating in medieval drama, performing in local “mystery plays” based on Biblical stories, which were the main form of

1 Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare (Harvester 1983) 9.
3 Rosamund Gilder, Enter the Actress: The First Women in Theatre (GG Harrap 1931) 64.
7 For example, Bulman states, “the early modern English banned women from their stages”, Gray states that “women were banned from the stage in English Renaissance theatre”, and even as astute a critic as Stephen Orgel claims that “the appearance of women on stage was forbidden”, that England “banned actresses from the public stage” and “proscribed women from the public stage”, though he knows this is wrong as “[s]tandard history implies that until the Restoration women were banned from the stage, but in fact this is not the case; there were no statutes whatever relating to the matter”: James Bulman, Shakespeare Re-dressed: Cross-gender Casting in Contemporary Performance (Farleigh Dickinson University Press 2008) 24-5; Floyd Gray, Gender, Rhetoric and Print Culture in French Renaissance Writing (Cambridge University Press 2000) 146; Stephen Orgel, Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England (Cambridge University Press 1996) 1-2, 72. For a summary, see Carol Rutter, ‘Learning Thisby’s Part, or What’s Hecuba To Him?’ (2007) 22(3) Shakespeare Bulletin 5, 13.
theatre at the time. The birth of the Renaissance brought with it a renewed taste in secular plays influenced by the classics rather than religion. It also saw the establishment of professional theatrical troupes performing these plays. These troupes established their own theatres in London city and toured their works throughout the regions, gradually usurping the amateur local plays through a touring model under which quality professional theatre was available to those in rural areas.

The dawn of the Renaissance also brought with it great social upheaval and displacement in rural England owing to changes in the agrarian economy brought about by the rising regional population and enclosure of previously common grazing lands. These displacements produced large numbers of landless poor including women, most of them gravitating toward London in search of employment, but others wandering the countryside without so clear a purpose. At the same time as landless poor were wandering the countryside in search of places to dwell, performers were touring the countryside in search of a captive audience. The regions had to contend with this growing swarm of mobile people. Therefore, vagrancy laws were introduced, which aimed to curtail the movement of these wandering populations.

VAGRANCY ACT 1547

Though passed during the Tudor reign, the first vagrancy law of the Renaissance period was An Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds and for the Relief of the Poor and Impotent Persons 1547 (Vagrancy Act 1547), which defined as a vagrant “anyone unemployed for three or more days” and decreed that any vagrant “refusing to work was to be treated as a vagabond, branded with a “V”, and condemned to slavery for two years or life enslavement if they tried to escape. The Vagrancy Act 1547 was the first such Act to mention women. Prior to this, statutes had practised the “masculine rule” of using male pronouns to represent women, based on the premise that the norm of humanity is male and therefore “he” subsumes “she”. The adoption of feminine pronouns in the statute both acknowledges an increased presence of

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10 ibid 34. See also Alexis Easley, ‘Wandering Women: Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journals and the Discourse on Female Vagrancy’ (1996) 3(1) Women’s Writing 63, 63-68.
11 Shapiro (n 6) 190; Underdown (n 9) 35.
12 ibid.
13 1 Edward VI c 3.
17 Christopher Williams, ‘The End of the “Masculine Rule”?: Gender-Neutral Legislative Drafting in the United Kingdom and Ireland’ (2008) 29(3) Statute L Rev 139, 139.
female vagrants - by 1600, “roughly half were men, another 25 percent women, while 12 percent were married couples”\textsuperscript{18} - and is also a conscious effort to include women within the legislative framework of the period.

However, because of the irregular use of feminine pronouns throughout the Act and inconsistent alternation between “he” or “he or she”, it is not clear if the legislature intended any specific provisions to address women. Furthermore, no specific provisions dealt with performers, yet alone female performers.

**VAGRANCY ACT 1572**

A clearer system of using feminine pronouns emerged under An Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds and for the Relief of the Poor and Impotent 1572 (Vagrancy Act 1572),\textsuperscript{19} the first such act of the Renaissance. It declared that,

“[a]ll and every person and persons being whole and mighty in body and able to labour, having not land or master, nor using any lawful merchandise, craft or mystery whereby he or she might get his or her living, and can give no reckoning how he or she doth lawfully get his or her living”,

is a vagabond and liable for vagrancy,\textsuperscript{20} the punishment for which was to be whipped and bored through the ear with a hot poker.\textsuperscript{21} Most of the Act follows the pattern of using both pronouns when referring to both sexes and using masculine pronouns when referring to men only.\textsuperscript{22} For example, punishment was suspended where,

“[s]ome honest person, valued at the last subsidy [taxation valuation] next before that time to five pounds in goods or twenty shillings in lands, or else some such honest householder... will of his charity be contented presently to take such offender... into his service for one whole year.”\textsuperscript{23}

This section uses masculine pronouns because the property threshold required the “honest person” to be a man. In the Renaissance, only a man could own property because a woman’s property became her husband’s upon marriage.\textsuperscript{24} Though in rare circumstances a

\textsuperscript{19} 14 Elizabeth 1 c 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Vagrancy Act 1572 (14 Elizabeth 1 c 4), s 5.
\textsuperscript{22} Petersson (n 16) 98.
\textsuperscript{23} Vagrancy Act 1572 (14 Elizabeth 1 c 4), s 2.
\textsuperscript{24} This remained the legal position until the Married Women’s Property Act 1870 (33 & 34 Victoria e 93).
single woman “would own sufficient property to spare a vagrant, this exception to the general rule... was not common enough to make express in the Act.”25 As the Vagrancy Act put any wayfaring vagrant under the control of a male householder and in “his service”, it was men who thus controlled women’s scope to perform, as female performers who fell foul of the vagrancy laws were reliant on the “charity” of rich men to protect them from punishment.

The Vagrancy Act 1572 was also the first vagrancy law to mention performers, declaring that,

“[a]ll fencers, bearwards [bear-keepers who toured the animals for bear-baiting events], common players in interludes and minstrels, not belonging to any baron of this realm or towards any other honourable personage of greater degree... which... shall wander abroad and have not license of two Justices of the Peace... shall be taken, adjudged and deemed rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars.”26

The Act recognises a distinction between unlicensed performers, to be driven-off and punished, and professional performers, to be patronised and licensed - the unlicensed or non-professional performer was “taken, adjudged and deemed” a vagrant and liable to punishment, whereas the professional performer was granted a licence or attached to a noble and afforded status and protections.27 The Act was a harbinger for the suppression of unlicensed regional theatre that had flourished in medieval England and “an early step in the progress of the professional players from strolling entertainers... to permanently established repatory companies” playing in the London theatres and touring regionally,28 through its establishment of a framework for the licensing of performance by the aristocracy and regulatory bodies.

The Act prescribes that for an actor or player to not be deemed a vagabond, he or she must either be:

a) “belonging to [a] baron... [or] other honourable personage of greater degree”; or
b) “license[d by] two Justices of the Peace”.

The only performers that were allowed to play were the liveried retainers of barons or those whose performances were seen and allowed by the Justices of the Peace. The power to regulate performance - which was unregulated until the Renaissance - was now shared across three bodies: the Crown and barons (the aristocracy), the Master of the Revels (the

25 Petersson (n 16) 98.
26 Vagrancy Act 1572 (14 Elizabeth 1 c 4), s 5.
bureaucracy), and local Justices of the Peace (the judiciary).

THE CROWN AND BARONS

The Vagrancy Act 1572 provides a discrete exception for performers “belonging to any baron... [or] other honourable personage of greater Degree.” The Act thus established a system of patronage of performance that was restricted to the upper classes of society and, significantly, to the males within that class. The section in question allows patronage of performers by a “baron” but not a baroness, and while this section also allows patronage by “any other honourable personage of greater Degree” without specification of gender, even under Queen Elizabeth’s court it was mostly men who occupied these “honourable personages.”29 For example, the acting company patronised by the Queen, the Queen’s Men, was overseen by a man30 and, as their title indicates, the company consisted only of men.

In fact, all liveried acting companies in the Renaissance consisted entirely of men.31 This reflects “male prerogatives of patronage”32 or what Melanie Faith describes as “male patronage circles.”33 The image of a circle suggests the cyclical nature of patronage, where men supported men through circles built on male friendship and mutual gift-giving, which were sometimes sodomitical in nature.34 As Bruce Smith writes, “homosexuality was one of the many symbolic ways in which males could enact and affirm the patriarchal power that dominated the entire culture.”35 Even if not sodomitical, male friendships, imperative to securing patronage, were based on an economy of gift-giving that was deeply homosocial in nature – the patron gives the gift of patronage and the recipient actor reciprocates or emulates this gift by dedicating their work to the patron.36 The system of patronage of performers established under the Act thus created a monopoly of men to the exclusion of women who were unable to break into the circles; a “world virtually absent of women.”37

THE MASTER OF THE REVELS

This professionalisation of performance under the Vagrancy Act 1572 also saw the establishment of a public office to control the burgeoning theatre industry: the Office of the

30 Gurr (n 29) 22.
36 Greene (n 35) 183-184.
37 ibid 178.
Master of the Revels. The Master of the Revels originally held responsibility for overseeing royal festivities or revels, but in the late Tudor period the Master of the Revels became an office independent of the royal court. In the Renaissance era, the role gradually extended to the general regulation of the public stage, through the power to grant a “patent [which] shows... royal confidence” in a performer or group of performers.

In 1581, Queen Elizabeth made it a requirement that performers secure a patent from the Master of the Revels and they could be imprisoned if they did not. However, the Master of the Revels granted patents liberally compared to local courts or Justices of the Peace. Most of the performers that were banned by local authorities had with them such a patent (including cases of female performers examined further below). This could be attributed to the fact that the licensing of performers was a source of revenue to the Master of the Revels, who charged fees for licensing plays and thus profited “by licensing play[er]s not by suppressing them” and made “a tidy if not spectacular income on this basis.” Nevertheless, a patent didn’t exempt performers from the provisions of the Vagrancy Act, as they still had to secure patronage from a baron or a licence from Justices of the Peace.

**JUSTICES OF THE PEACE**
Performers who did not “belong” to a baron or “other honorable personage of greater degree” - a category which included most Renaissance performers - were reliant on the alternative requirement of securing the “licence of two Justices of the Peace.” A Justice of the Peace was like the Master of the Revels - part of the broader executive arm of the Elizabethan government, acting as royal representative in every county, often concurrently with the local councillors and mayor. Performers generally sought their licence by appearance before the local court or mayor (who constituted Justices of the Peace), as Stephen Greenblatt evocatively describes:

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40 Clare (n 39) 12.
42 Dutton (n 39) 52.
43 Aylward (n 40) 19.
44 Shapiro (n 6) 190.
47 Michele Slatter, ‘The Norwich Court of Requests - A Tradition Continued’ in Albert Kenneth and others (eds), *Customs, Courts and Counsel* (Routledge 1985) 100.
“With a flourish of trumpets and the rattle of drums, the players swaggered down the street... to the house of the mayor... for it was he who would decide whether they would be sent packing or allowed to post their bills announcing the performances.”

More often than not however (as the next chapter demonstrates) female performers were turned away or allowed to stay for only a short period of time. Unlike the Master of the Revels, local authorities had a general disfavour towards performance. This was arguably because the local authorities received no economic benefit from the licensing of performance, but had to deal with the economic ramifications, such as the fear that a poor, roaming female performer may give birth and thus place a financial burden on the local parish.

Despite divergent views of the regulation of performance, for some time these three regulators seemed to work in harmony. The barons and other “honourable personages” could patronise players and playing troupes, and local Justices of the Peace could govern their playing within the city grounds. In practice, the Crown often divested the licensing of common players to the Master of the Revels who could issue patents to players, but the local Justices of the Peace could still control the performance of common players within their city through the granting of local licences. This two-tiered regulatory system ensured that both the Crown and the local authorities had power over the regulation of performance, but this was soon to change.

**VAGRANCY ACT 1597 & VAGRANCY ACT 1603**

The Crown became increasingly frustrated at the local councils’ reluctance to allow players to perform. This was largely because,

“[t]he city and the state maintained diametrically opposed positions concerning the very nature of the public theatre: the former held it to be in essence corrupt and inimical to the welfare of the commonwealth, whereas the latter held it to be frequently benign and potentially beneficial to the maintenance of public order and control, either through the inculcation of doctrine or through the displacement and release of social pressures.”

Perhaps in response to this tension, Parliament passed the Vagrancy Act 1597, which reiterated the requirement that players “belong” to a baron or higher officer, but made a significant change in the section that immediately follows this requirement:

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49 Shapiro (n 6) 190.
50 In 1584, the City of London banned the Queen’s Men from performing within the city, which likely provoked the ire of the monarch and set off a debate between the city and the state over the value of the public theatre. See Montrose (n 42) 55-63.
51 ibid 63.
“All fencers, bearwards, common players of interludes, and minstrels wandering abroad (other than players of interludes belonging to any baron of this realm, or any honourable personage of greater degree, to be authorised to play under the hand and seal [coat] of arms of such baron or personage)... ably in body, using loitering, and refusing to work for such reasonable wages... shall be taken, adjudged, and deemed rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars.”\(^{52}\)

Most obviously, the revised Act distinguishes between “common” players of interludes and liveried players, for “whereas previously all had been eligible for protection from charges of vagrancy, now it was only [liveried] players who could claim protection “under the hand and seal of arms” of the nobility.”\(^{53}\) However, the Act contains another, less explicit, revision. While the earlier Act allowed for the licensing of performers by local Justices of the Peace, the new Act transfers this authority exclusively to barons and other nobility.\(^{54}\) Then, in the Vagrancy Act 1603, King James took the sole power to regulate players of interludes unto himself, stating:

“From henceforth no authority to be given or made by any baron of this realm or any other honourable personage of greater degree unto any other person or persons shall be available to free and discharge the said persons, or any of them, from the pains and punishments in the said statute.”\(^{55}\)

Through this legislation, the protection of a nobleman’s licence or that granted by a Justice of the Peace was dispensed with and players of interludes could only be licensed by the King. This was reflective of “a desire to limit the growing power of public employees... and exclude them from the more social forms of status and power”\(^{56}\) and to “confine the performance of plays to the companies licensed by royal patent... [and] confer a monopoly upon the patented companies.”\(^{57}\)

Thus professional acting companies started to emerge with a trade-like apprentice structure.\(^{58}\) Of the small travelling troupes, extant casting lists indicate that most “comprised six or eight men and two boys who usually doubled in any number of female and juvenile roles” and were quasi-apprentices in the company learning the acting craft from the men.\(^{59}\) The larger

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\(^{52}\) Vagrancy Act 1597 (34 Elizabeth 1 c 4) s 3.


\(^{54}\) ibid.

\(^{55}\) Vagrancy Act 1603 (1 James 1 c 7) s 1.

\(^{56}\) ibid 28.

\(^{57}\) George Nicholls, A History of the English Poor Law in Connection with the State of the Country and the Condition of the People (PS King 1904) 210.

\(^{58}\) Montrose (n 42) 55.

\(^{59}\) Shapiro (n 6) 183.
companies, like Shakespeare’s, “typically comprised twelve adult members... and three or four younger male performers to take female and juvenile roles.”

There is no evidence of these companies including women. Michael Shapiro argues that the exclusion of women was a result of a “desire on the part of male actors to preserve the profession of acting as a site for male employment” and that,

“modifying a time-honoured practice in order to include women in acting troupes would probably have seemed threatening to male performers accustomed to all-male companies... in which many had learned the craft by starting with juvenile female roles, the very roles women would usurp should they enter the profession.”

Again, the circles of male patronage emerge in the structure of the acting troupes; with the boy actor apprentice developing from female roles into the male lead, he takes on his own boy apprentice and the circle continues.

Because of this, many women turned from the city-based troupes to the regional stages, where there was “a significant body of...itinerant women performers.”

The Act excluded common players from the requirement of royal patronage so long as they could show that they were not loitering or refusing to work. Therefore, a number of women created their own performance works, which they toured around the regions: “touring women were acknowledged as professional entertainers, licensed by the state to perform, and paid for their performances in cities and towns across the country”. These female performances were not “amateurish and vaudevillian... but instead had the potential to be no less skillful or political than the plays of Shakespeare.”

VAGRANCY CASE LAW

Removing the regulatory powers over performance from local authorities created a burgeoning industry in itinerant women’s performance during the Jacobean era. Women performers were typically “travelling in small familial groups”, but also “performed alone, with their husbands and with troupes.” The records indicate that most performers continued the practice of

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60 ibid.
61 ibid 192.
63 ibid.
64 ibid 150.
66 Mueller (n 64) 173.
securing a patent from the court-appointed Master of the Revels[^67] and the “convention if not the legal requirement that [they]... first approached the mayor for his permission [to perform] was evidently still observed”[^68] though some may not have bothered to do so as they were no longer required to;[^69] their performances do not appear in the local court records.

Some performers were ordered away by the mayor or other local authorities, even though the latter’s ability to license performance was stripped by the Vagrancy Act 1603. As Andrew Gurr explains:

> “Although civic authorities did continue to grant permission for companies to give performances in their municipalities for some decades after 1603, it is not easy to see whether in doing so they were simply hanging onto a by then long-running practice, or more positively clinging to the privilege of controlling the plays to be offered to their citizenry in spite of centralised controls that now existed.”[^70]

The court records thus reflect the futility of “town authorities trying to get control of a practice over which they no longer had any control.”[^71] Most of these existing records are contained in the minute books of courts leet. The courts leet were local courts, generally consisting of the mayor and council alderman, which exercised “administrative, legislative and corrective functions” over the local area.[^72] In the latter half of the Renaissance, many sought “to retain the authority to allow performing... in their own territory.”[^73] Gurr offers a number of reasons for this:

> “Plague was one ample reason for retaining that control. The risk of disorders, particularly when performance times ran into the night, was another. A further and not always mute factor that was certainly present was that they clung to their powers in the hope that they might still be able to check the onset of such repulsive pastimes as playgoing.”[^74]

Their jurisdiction to regulate performance was, however, dubious. Despite this, it appears that performers heeded their decisions; no records exist of appeals against the decisions of

[^67]: ibid 173.
[^69]: Mueller (n 64) 169. See also Gurr (n 70) 5-6.
[^70]: Gurr (n 70) 4.
[^71]: Mueller (n 64) 169. See also Gurr (n 70) 6.
[^72]: Michele Slatter, ‘The Norwich Court of Requests - A Tradition Continued’ in Albert Kenneth and others (eds), Customs, Courts and Counsel (Routledge 1985) 100.
[^73]: Gurr (n 70) 4.
[^74]: ibid.
courts leet or punishments for failure to obey them.

WOMEN WITH PERFORMERS

Many cases depict women touring the English countryside alongside performers, often in their capacity as managers, with licences from the Master of the Revels to do so:75

_de Roson’s Case_ (1614)

“Ciprian de Roson with his wife... who shewed forth A lycence vnder the seale of the Master of Revelles authorisinge theme to shewe feates of actiuity together with A beast Called an Elke nowe enioyned to depart the Cyttie this present day vppon Payne of whippynge.”76

_Wyatt’s Case_ (1618)

“Ths day Thomas Wyatt & Ioane his wife brought into this Court A lycence... vnnder the hand and seale of... [the] maister of the Revelles for the shewynge of... a man monstrously deformed And he hath liberty to shew him this present day & no longer.”77

While both de Roson and Wyatt had a licence from the Master of the Revels, they were either not allowed to perform (de Roson) or only permitted to do so for a short period of time (Wyatt). Whilst the decisions to allow one and not the other are seemingly arbitrary, a closer reading reveals more. In de Roson’s Case, the husband and wife sought “to shewe feates of actiuity together with A beast Called an Elke”, which suggests that the woman would be performing on stage together with the elk. Whereas, in Wyatt’s Case, the husband and wife sought permission “for the shewynge of... a man monstrously deformed”, which suggests that the woman would not be taking part in the staged performance. Also notably, the court says in Wyatt’s Case, “he [Mr Wyatt] hath liberty to shew him [the deformed man].” On a strict reading, no such licence was granted to his wife even though she also held the Master of the Revels’ licence.

Whilst the cases demonstrate that women were recognised as performers and performance managers, the decisions also reflect Renaissance male concerns about women “gadding about”. Both women in the cases above were accompanied by their husbands. The approach to unaccompanied women was, however, quite different; for the “male sex cherished its right to move freely about... but agreed with preachers who sought to relegate [travelling]

76 Ciprian de Roson Inioyned to depart (Court of Mayorality of Norwich, 27 September 1614) [de Roson’s Case (1614)] cited in David Galloway (ed), Records of Early English Drama: Norwich, 1540-1642 (Toronto University Press 1984) 142.
77 Wyatts Lycence (Court of Mayorality of Norwich, 22 August 1618) [Wyatt’s Case (1618)] cited in Galloway (n 78) 156-7.
women strictly to the home” or the supervision of their travelling husbands.78 During the Renaissance, “women who gadded about outside the home... were suspected of being whores... [whereas] the good woman was closed off: silent, chaste and immured within the home”,79 which functioned as “the centre for control and for instantiating the wife within the domestic sphere” as against the relative freedom of the travelling life.80 These anxieties about travelling women bespoke a patriarchal concern with keeping women away from the sexualised outside world, where the glimpse of a lusty man could pervert their womanhood.81 So, just as the Vagrancy Act placed any wayfaring vagrant under the control of a male householder, travelling women performers were often only allowed under the supervision of their husbands. Notably, in the one recorded case of an unaccompanied female performer (Provoe’s Case 2), local authorities denied permission to perform.82

WOMEN AS PERFORMERS
The aforementioned cases represent women’s engagement with provincial performance, but do not represent women as performers. There are, however, cases of women performers on the provincial stage. Although the performances could be interpreted as reinforcing Renaissance ideas of women under the control of others - the audience, the husband accompanist or as the regulated object of local authorities - these performances could alternatively be seen as personally expressive and politically challenging acts. Though cases of women performers are small in number, they demonstrate the existence and power of itinerant women’s performance, such as the following:

Provoe’s Case (1633)
“Adrian Provoe & his wife brought into this Court A lycence vnder the Seale of the Revelles... whereby she beinge a woman without handes is lycenced to shew diverse workes &c done with her feete, they are lycenced to make their shewes fower dayes.”83

Provoe had the permission of the Master of the Revels to perform and travelled large distances across England to do so - from Norwich to Dorset at least - though she was not

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78 Woodbrige (n 22) 252.
80 ibid 428.
82 Woodbrige (n 22) 254.
83 Adrian Provoe his wife without hands (Court of Mayoralty of Norwich, 13 July 1633) [Provoe’s Case (1633)] cited in Galloway (n 78) 211.
licensed by local authorities in the latter:

*Provoe's Case 2 (1634)*

“Here came a French woman that had no hands, but would write, sow, wash, & do many other things with her feet: She had a commission under the seal of the Master of the Reuelles. not allowed here.”

The disallowance of her performance in Dorset is not remarkable in and of itself, since many performers were turned away from the city at this time due to the advent of puritanism and poor behaviour by touring performers in the local area. It is also notable that her appearance in the Dorset court was without her husband. Provoe did, however, earn the permission of local authorities to perform for four days in Norwich and “likely played in inns, cities and households in between.”

Sara Mueller argues that Provoe “was not just licensed to perform and permitted to perform legally, but also a performer who staged complicated, challenging performances.” Her performances were an “example of the potential of itinerant women’s performance to upset norms and enact cultural anxieties”, through what Mueller describes as “the burlesque of domesticity.” Her performance made spectacle of the enforced domesticity of the Renaissance woman in the way she would “sow” and “wash”: “Provoe’s French origin, handless arms and extremely dexterous feet transformed the mundane actions she stages into an extraordinary and familiar spectacle, essentially recasting the quotidian as carnivalesque”. She “had a sanctioned performance space within the culture, and she transformed that space into a performance [in] which she addressed the circumstances of her day to day life” - a form of performance potentially more powerful than traditional playacting for the way it explores the position of women within society and challenges it too. She would “write” as well, possibly conveying ideas about herself and certainly displaying a literary ability above that of most Renaissance women.

Extraordinary ability and “feats of activity” marked much of women’s recorded performance in the Renaissance, as in the following:

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84 Unreported (Dorset, 5 December 1634) [Provoe’s Case 2 (1634)] cited in Rosalind Hays and Edward McGee (eds), Records of Early English Drama: Dorset (Toronto University Press 1999) 206.
85 Hays and McGee (n 86) 46-7.
86 Mueller (n 64) 188.
87 ibid 189.
88 ibid.
89 ibid.
90 ibid 190.
“Iohn De Rue & Ieronimo Galt ffrenchmen brought before mr Maior in the Counsell Chamber A Lycence... thereby authorisinge the said Iohn De Rue & Ieronimo Galt ffrenchmen to sett forth & shewe rare feats of Activity with a Dancinge on the Ropes performed by a woman & also A Baboone that can do strange feats, And because the lycence semeth not sufficient they are forbidden to play.”

This act, Mueller describes as “a spectacle of difference layered upon difference: the woman’s French origin, her unusual rope dancing skill, and the baboon she performs with.” However, like Provoe, the woman in question “strives to create difference” as a way of confronting and challenging patriarchal assumptions about women’s roles and abilities.

There is much debate over whether these women can – or should – be seen as performers. Brown and Parolin argue that “these women cannot be seen as players in the agential sense because they were... [not] designating or controlling their own display.” There is no indication that they spoke but rather they were simply looked upon and, in the case of Provoe, “became the mark, the target of a disavowal, a ridding, of existential fears and fantasies of non-disabled people” who watched. Their performance does not challenge concepts around the ability of Renaissance women but “invites repulsion and reinforces conceptions of normalcy and attractiveness” amongst the watching audience. The state had an interest in licensing these performances as a situs for the ridding of social anxieties and reinforcement of gender ideology. For, in performance, the “woman [is] the fetishised object of the gaze” and, moreover, a “passive object to be actively transformed”, and interpolated the audience according to their own prejudices.

Mueller cautions, however, that though “it is important to acknowledge the repugnant practice of displaying people with disabilities... it is similarly important to acknowledge that these people could be bona fide performers.” Provoe was not just put on display for her
disability, but rather, the attraction of her act was her ability, an ability to perform otherwise domestic or mundane tasks in an extraordinary manner. Likewise the woman accompanying Messrs de Due and Galt undertook “feats of activity” in her rope-dancing that excelled ordinary ability.\footnote{Other cases of rope-dancing, or what is commonly termed tight-rope walking, that attest to extraordinary skill of this act are documented in Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England from the Earliest Period* (Methuen & Co 1801) 179-80.} Such “performances offer moments in which the performer can take control, reinterpret the scenario, and mock or otherwise resist authority.”\footnote{Brown and Parolin (n 98) 8.} This “potential for engaging with a particular audience... offered the possibility for politically charged improvisation at any time.”\footnote{Mueller (n 64) 192.} Therefore, these performances could be seen as “a politically challenging theatrical event”\footnote{ibid 186.}.

**CONCLUSION**

While women were excluded from the London main-stages, which were dominated by the liveried acting troupes, they did perform on provincial stages. Their performances were lawfully regulated by patent from the Master of the Revels or licence from the local authorities, and they used this “sanctioned performance space” as a vehicle to either “address the circumstances of... [their] day-to-day life” (Provoe)\footnote{ibid 190.} or, on the other extreme, to showcase “rare feats of activity” (de Rue & Galt). While the legal regulation of vagrant performers led to the development of all-male acting troupes to the exclusion of women from the London theatre, it also created a burgeoning industry of itinerant women’s performance across the stages of rural England. That such women commanded a public audience represents a major shift from their position within homes to their status as public figures performing their art to the eyes of many others, and significantly challenges the notion that the Renaissance theatre was an all-male stage.

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\footnotetext[103]{Other cases of rope-dancing, or what is commonly termed tight-rope walking, that attest to extraordinary skill of this act are documented in Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England from the Earliest Period* (Methuen & Co 1801) 179-80.}
\footnotetext[104]{Brown and Parolin (n 98) 8.}
\footnotetext[105]{Mueller (n 64) 192.}
\footnotetext[106]{ibid 186.}
\footnotetext[107]{ibid 190.}