

Actresses as Eunuchs: The Versatility of Cross-Gendered Roles in Eighteenth-Century Orientalist Theatre

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Abstract : Introductory Statement: During the eighteenth century in London, there were over two dozen theatrical productions that featured eunuchoid characters, most of which were set in 'Eastern' locales, including the Ottoman Empire, Persia, India, and China. These characters have gone largely overlooked by recent scholars, and more analysis is needed in order to illustrate the contemporary values and anxieties reflected in these popular and recurring figures at the time. Methodology: This paper adopts a New Historical and Cultural Studies approach to the subject of theatrical depictions of eunuchs, drawing insights from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary works, travel narratives, medical treatises, and histories of the age. Major Findings: As this paper demonstrates, there was a high degree of complexity, variety, and -at times- respect underlying orientalist theatrical depictions of eunuchs. Not only were eunuchoid characters represented in strikingly diverse ways in scripts, but these roles were also played by a heterogeneous group of actors and even actresses. More specifically, this paper looks closely at three actresses who took roles as eunuchs in tragedies: Mrs. Verbruggen (aka Mrs. Mountfort), Mrs. Rogers, and Mrs. Bicknell—all of whom were otherwise best known as comediennes. These casting choices provided an entertaining twist on the breeches roles these actresses often played. In fact, the staging and scripting of these roles, when analyzed through the lens of these cross-gendered roles, becomes ironic and comical in several scenes that are usually assumed (by recent scholars) to be thoroughly tragic. Conclusion: Ultimately, a careful look at the staging of eunuchoid characters sheds light on not only how these productions were performed and understood, but also on how writers and theatre managers navigated the Other, whether in gender identity or culture, during this era.

Keywords : eunuch, actress, literature, drama

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