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Harlots and Hooligans: The Representation of Women in *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn (1738)*

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ABSTRACT

The Licensing Act egregiously hindered the English theatrical community when it was placed into effect by King George II in 1737. Strolling actors were thereby forbidden to perform in new plays for profit, forcing acting troupes to disband. This act was widely protested throughout England at the time, most notably by artist William Hogarth in his etching titled *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn*. This etching cleverly protests the Licensing Act as well as a myriad of quandaries that plagued 18th-century English society, namely, gender roles both on and off the stage. Yet, what exactly is the relationship between actresses in 18th-century England and the Licensing Act of 1737, and how does Hogarth's etching *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* interact with this relationship? Building off of my presentation for the Kennesaw State University College of The Arts Research Forum, my research dissects Hogarth's etching and unpacks the role of the woman central in the image. I have drawn connections between the censorship enforced upon the theatre community by the Licensing Act of 1737 and the constant suppression and sexualization of women in 18th-century England. I have also analyzed Hogarth's repertoire of etchings that hold a specific political or social purpose in correlation to women or the theatre. I have investigated Hogarth's theories on the sustainability of the Licensing Act and its ability to provide England with a safe theatrical community that glorified the church and state. My research will pioneer an exploration towards a greater understanding of the relationship between art as a medium of protest and its effects on society. Finally, this article will also reveal the importance of analyzing the extraordinary power of 18th-century women in theatre.

Keywords: 18th Century, Theatre, Women, Gender, Art History, William Hogarth

Introduction

According to caricaturist Roger Law, etchings in 18th-century England “were the television of the day and the art market was vigorous” (58). William Hogarth was central to this market, as Law further writes, “His work defined London; The city was, in a word, Hogarthian” (58). The artist's popularity provided an ideal platform for him to, “lampoon, not as a politician, but as a great moral reformer”, and express his

opinions and ideas to the people of 18th-century England (Watson, 152). Taking advantage of this, in 1738 Hogarth etched *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* (see fig. 1) as a direct protest to the Licensing Act of 1737 that prohibited strolling players, or actors that belonged to a traveling troupe, from traveling to different venues and performing new plays. Since the theatre community could not use theatre to protest this act without defying it, Hogarth decided

to use his art as a form of protest to voice his opinions on the matter. This paper will argue that Hogarth's *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* tactfully protested the Licensing

Act of 1737 and an actress's place in theatre, thereby illustrating how visual and theatrical art can work together as an effective form of social protest.



Fig.1 Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn 1738

Hogarth's etching depicts an extensive amount of chaos. These strolling players appear to be preparing for their final performance before the Act takes effect. However, due to the abundance and variety of props and costumes, it is unclear, at first, which play they are performing. Upon further examination, you will notice that there are nine actresses and four children. Center in the image is a scandalously dressed woman, who is unapologetic about her lack of clothing. This woman's light, flowy dress and her feminine, commanding posture immediately entices the viewer's eye. Some initial questions that might pertain: Who is the woman and why is her lack of clothing important? How does the Licensing Act of 1737 pertain to these female players? And,

how are Hogarth's etching and the Licensing Act related? Although there are multiple sources that validate Hogarth's success as a visual artist, there are few that elaborate on details of this image, in particular, as a form of protest. Therefore, this paper will help further the understanding of the etching's political and social significance.

Between 1727-1760, England was under the reign of King George II, a regular theatregoer, as well as a devout member of the Protestant church. He was so much a patron of the arts that in 1745, his presence at a gala performance at Drury Lane Theater in London inspired the British National Anthem to be written (Susan 1). This devotion to both the church and the arts brought forth an

ongoing issue with some of the subject matter and the ideas that these theatre shows were constantly preaching to the people of England (Fellows-Jensen). In addition to religious pressure, George II decided to take control and limit the subject matter of British theatre after the play *The King and Titi* satirized the strained relationship between himself and the Prince of Wales (Kinservik 92). This took the form of the Licensing Act of 1737, which offered up a set of new regulations that displeased the people of England, especially the people connected to the theatrical arts.

The Act allowed the British government to heavily censor theatrical productions and decide which shows were appropriate for the stage (Crean). This affected both writers and actors alike obstructing the outlet of creativity to which these artists shared their ideas and opinions. The law instructed that all new theatrical pieces had to be sent to the Lord Chamberlain to be approved no less than fourteen days at least before the play was to take place (Raithby 267). In the Act, actors and actresses were also deemed “rogues and vagabonds” and were no longer allowed to “for hire, gain, or reward” perform in a theatrical production (266). This new societal interpretation of the acting profession disrupted the role of theatrical players in society, degrading these men and women and discrediting their craft by highlighting the negative stereotypes associated with the theatre. Therefore, Hogarth took it upon himself to protest the act by depicting a copy of it in his etching at the bottom left corner, thus inviting the people of 18th-century England to rethink their opinions about King George II and his new law.

As an additional protest, Hogarth’s etching is a “female-dominated space” where nine actresses and four children are preparing

for their final performance as a troupe of strolling actresses (Rosenthal). The intentional lack of male actors in a depiction of a typically male dominated profession enhances Hogarth’s focus on the women in 18th-century English theatre. In the lower left corner of the etching, the paper laying on top of the playbill is a copy of the Licensing Act of 1737, which further proves that this etching was in direct protest to the new law. According to this playbill, the actresses are performing a play called “The Devil to Pay in Heaven” that is fictional yet alludes to the heavy censorship that not only the Church but also the Licensing Act enforced onto theatrical productions, specifically mystery plays. English mystery plays illustrated, “incidents derived from the legends of the Saints of the Church”, as well as “gospel events,” within the New and Old Testaments (Ward 23). In the 16th century, however, Henry VIII and the English Protestant church banned these mystery plays because they believed them to favor the Catholic church (Britannica). In addition to paying homage to mystery plays, the actress’s appearance alludes to the stereotypical reputation that actresses possessed during this time period. Their scandalous image resulted from the actions of a few actresses who were notorious for providing “sinful” acts in exchange for money or other favors. The “Devil” in the play’s title alludes to the devilish stereotype that 18th-century English actresses possessed and the payment in “Heaven” alludes to England’s increased censorship over the content of theatrical performances.

In addition, the playbill reveals that the actresses play roles that parallel Roman goddesses. The woman in the center plays Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, the moon, and nature. Traditionally, Diana is associated with weapons that pertain to hunting, however, in this instance, the actress is portraying Diana as the goddess of

chastity. Interestingly, the half-naked figure in the image plays “The Devil to Pay in Heaven’s” characterization of Diana, which juxtaposes with traditional qualities of chastity (Darvill). By positioning the character at the center, the etching presents an additional direct protest to the role of women in England at the time. It directly counters how the society of 18th-century England viewed women, especially women on stage as peripheral, by making her center stage in the theatrical image (Hill). It was around the 1660s when women first took to the stage and, according to Jessica Lamb’s “History of Women on the British Stage,” although actresses continued to gain popularity over the years, they were still overlooked in favor of the male actors of the time. Hogarth’s choice to place a woman at the center of his etching is significant, especially since in some of his other works, he has included women in stereotypically demeaning roles of the time, like orange girls in *The Laughing Audience*, 1733, which were women who prowled the theater during intermission and sold oranges, sometimes in exchange for sexual favors. Many actresses of the time were also viewed only as “sexual appeal for marketable commodity” (West). Therefore, by placing a woman at the center of his protest who does not seem bothered by her lack of clothing in this public forum, the image is owning, flaunting even, the societal stereotype of actresses being harlots (Barsalou). As Felicity Nussbaum quotes in her book *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*,

An obscene jest, or a double entendre, which would have lost half its poignancy out of the mouth of a young man, or boy in petticoats, was highly relished when spoken by a beautiful woman. A female,

gay, loose, and wanton, represented by a beardless youth, would have been a character not likely to be well received, but when filled by a young and handsome woman, desiring and desirable herself (it may be too, the very original from whence the poet in the warmth of his fancy, perhaps a little heated by love, drew the glowing picture) the odiousness of the representation was wiped off, vice was rendered amiable, and she herself became the object of impure desires (The Playhouse Pocket-Companion, or Theatrical Vade Medum, 37).

As mentioned earlier, the Licensing Act tarnished the reputations of actors and actresses and, therefore, by making actresses prominent in his etching, Hogarth emphasizes the upset that this Act brought forth in English society. By labeling theatre performers as harlots and hooligans, the law suggested that theatre performers placed themselves on stage to be sexualized and lusted after by audience members. Though some actresses and actors were famous for having affairs with affluent members of English society, many of them acted in plays purely for the thrill of entertaining. On the other hand, some of the most famous actresses started out as “orange girls,” which according to scholar Wynne-Davies, are “women [who] are often depicted as selling their company and/or sexual favors” to affluent audience members (23). In 1733, Hogarth portrayed these women in his etching titled *The Laughing Audience*, which depicts these orange girls at work during

intermission (the women holding baskets in Fig. 2).



Figure 2. *The Laughing Audience*, 1733

Hogarth's prior knowledge of these orange girls and the stigmatic 18th-century idea of theatrical women as sexual objects likely influenced his reasoning for making a scarcely dressed woman so prominent. The actress could also be a symbol of direct protest simply because she is staring into the eyes of the viewer, making her the focal point of the etching. This eye contact offers the figure agency by forcing the viewer to acknowledge her status as the focal point, the subject, of the image. Additionally, the Diana figure could represent the oversexualized gender roles within the English theatre environment and, by centralizing her, Hogarth is critiquing and challenging the peripheral roles that women have played in the theatre.

In addition, the figure on the left side of the etching is cross-dressed in 18th-century men's clothing. The individual's face has female features and wears highly visible stockings identical to the woman in the center. This woman dressed as a man could represent the women's journey to the stage and how she penetrated a male dominated profession. It also could reflect the

juxtaposition of how men in theatre are viewed as artists, and women are seen as harlots. The woman in the image is pretending to be a man to challenge that stereotype. The inclusion of the stockings could symbolize the feminine influence within the English patriarchal society, and the woman maintaining her caring, feminine side despite being marginalized. Her feminine side also has her maintaining a caring side as seen when the figure appears to be tending to another actress. Hogarth's illustration of a woman in traditional men's clothing tending to another woman represents the ideas of equality alongside the protection of femininity that women, both within and outside of the theatrical community, longed for.

On the opposite side of the etching are two women, one who appears to be wrestling a panic-stricken cat and one that seems to be amputating the cat's tail. The woman holding the cat could be using the process of bloodletting, a popular medicinal practice of the time, as a metaphor for the strolling actresses' desperate attempts to survive the censorship enforced by the Licensing Act. In addition to this, the panicked expression on this woman's face parallels the uncertainty that the entire theatre industry felt at the time. The woman that is performing the bloodletting, adorned with a cross broach and a crown, appears to be enjoying the process of watching an innocent creature suffer and, therefore, could represent both the church and the government's power over the theatre industry. This woman who, at first, appears to be helping the panicked woman is actually taking pleasure in her frantic attempt to preserve her livelihood. The use of the broken bowl aids in this theory by representing the loss of the strolling player's hard work in trying to keep their industry afloat, just as the blood from the cat is dripping onto the floor.

This etching provides us with evidence of how contemporary audiences viewed actresses and the theatrical community. The chaotic nature of the piece illustrates how people of 18th-century England viewed the theatre. The barn, specifically, represents how society viewed the theatre as a parade of fictional animalistic behavior that, somehow, paralleled the messiness of reality. This etching parallels these themes because of the mass amounts of chaos and the scarcely dressed woman in the center. The culture of 18th-century England was also religiously oriented towards the Protestant church, yet this etching depicts characters that represent Roman deities and are preparing for a seemingly anti-religious play. Furthermore, the depiction of women in the etching directly opposes the European ideals of a patriarchal society, even usurping male authority through crossdressing. It outwardly protests major aspects of English society that relates to the culture of the theatre, showing how that the contemporary members of 18th-century English society disapproved of the societal norms and supported theatre as a form of escape. The analysis of this etching provides us with the understanding that George II's 1737 law was the breaking point which caused society to protest their way of life. Hogarth's engraving suggests that the necessity of the Licensing Act came about because the theatre had become so popular as a mode of critiquing society that it has gained the attention of the great leaders of the country who then felt threatened by the fact that theatre's influence of society outweighed their own influence.

Hogarth's *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* tactfully protested the Licensing Act of 1737 by calling attention to the problematic restrictions that the law placed upon the 18th-century English theatrical community. The etching blatantly

called out the act by placing it in the corner alongside a playbill for the strolling actresses' last performance. Hogarth was also successful in protesting the roles of women through the central figure of Diana, directly challenging the stereotypical nature of these roles. Hogarth's etching proved that one piece of art can highlight and draw attention to widespread issues that common people can rally around to demand change.

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