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The Roared-at Boys? Repertory casting and gender politics in the RSC's 2014 Swan season

From its initial announcement, the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2014 "Roaring Girls" season began coding the terms of its reception. The company's brochure announced that

In 2014, the Swan Theatre plays host to a season that reveals some of the great parts written for, and plays about, women by Shakespeare's contemporaries. Led by RSC Deputy Artistic Director Erica Whyman, and directed by some of British theatre's most exciting female directors, the season promises to introduce audiences to Jacobean classics, from the comic to the thrillingly dark, each with women at the heart of the action ("Summer 14").

The reception of the company's new productions of the blackly comic (and Elizabethan rather than Jacobean) domestic tragedy *Arden of Faversham*, Middleton and Dekker's city comedy *The Roaring Girl* and Webster's sex tragedy *The White Devil* was, in the above terms, already loaded. Viewed within Susan Bennett's model, in which "the production company seeks to produce an internal horizon of expectations which will attract audiences through challenging their own already formed expectations/assumptions about a particular play or theatrical style" (113), the RSC established a horizon of expectations based on the alignment of plays "written for" and "about" women, "directed by ... exciting female directors" and that place "women at the heart of the action".¹ Particularly in contrast to the work of the main house, whose summer season staged plays nominally about "King Henry" and "Two Gentlemen", the

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RSC drove the marketing of its “Jacobean” season on the strength and specificity of its interest in women.

The challenge to expectations/assumptions, in Bennett’s model, is here predicated on the shared assumption that attention to women is unusual: it is abnormal within the RSC’s core practice to have a season explicitly focusing on women or, more pertinently, “girls”. These girls are the attraction of the season, identified as the main draw, and are thus unique and distinctive. Yet this season is not merely about women; it is specifically about girls who are “roaring”, suggesting a further delimitation. This article aims to unpack the implications of the horizon of expectations surrounding “roaring girls” as marketed and performed by the RSC in the course of this season, particularly when considered alongside the accompanying “Midsummer Mischief” new writing season at The Other Place. The utilisation of a shared ensemble company for the Swan season invites consideration of the plays as a group, and through some of the purposeful or coincidental connections between these plays, it is possible to see a series of shared statements emerging.

Roaring Girls

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “roaring” thus:

Of a person: behaving or living in a rowdy, boisterous, or unruly manner. Now *rare* (*arch.* in later use). (3a)

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Rowdiness and unruliness inherently suggest positioning against a standard expectation; the “roarer” is positioned and defined by her or his lack of adherence to an established behavioural norm. However, the OED’s “special uses” are more interesting:

roaring boy n. now *hist.* (freq. in *pl.*) a man or boy given to or characterized by noisy, riotous, or drunken behaviour. Common in the 17th and early 18th centuries, often as a stock character in drama.

roaring girl n. the female counterpart of a roaring boy; a noisy, bawdy, or riotous woman or girl, esp. one who takes on a masculine role.

There are several interesting nuances here. By accident or design, “drunken[ness]” is specifically allocated to the male version of the figure, perhaps suggesting that for men “roaring” may manifest as an occasional behaviour in a state of inebriation rather than being inherent to the person, whereas “noisy” and “riotous” are shared. The distinction is also made between the relatively historical connotations of the roaring boy and the still-current sense of the roaring girl. The more obvious recognisability of the latter phrase is, as the OED admits, an effect of *The Roaring Girl*, the play that established regular usage of the term for future generations. Nonetheless, the suggestion is that the “roaring boy” has ceased to be a distinctive figure whereas the “roaring girl” implies an ongoing normalisation of gendered expectations of behaviour.

The most fascinating point here, however, is that the OED sees fit to point out that the “roaring boy” appears frequently in plural, while the “roaring girl” is understood to be singular. As Peter Womack points out, “Roaring Boys were urban youths who spent their time drinking, smoking, swearing and fighting. Roaring girls were

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unheard of" (202), pointing not only to the unusual existence of Moll but also her *singularity*. Boys are *collectively* "roaring", evoking both a pack mentality and a social aspect to this behaviour, borne out by the regular appearance of groups of roarers, gallants or city wits throughout Jacobean city comedies from *Epicoene* to *The Roaring Girl*. The OED's definition of the "roaring girl" as a singular figure is borne out by Whyman's own comment on Moll that she is "thoroughly unique" (RSC, *The Roaring Girl*, 2). In relation to the whole season, Whyman emphasises instead the "variety" and "very different" nature of the plays, yoked by their "powerfully fascinating women". The RSC's decision to advertise its season as "roaring" thus continues to perpetuate the idea of a "noisy, bawdy, or riotous woman" as something unusual or singular, pointing to the unusually noisy (outspoken? vocal?) quality of the featured women, while simultaneously creating artificially a community of roaring girls, inviting audiences to see a reiterated figure and imagine solidarity between these hitherto isolated women.

Given that the title of *The Roaring Girl* already isolates Moll, to treat her as singular is no stretch. However, to define Moll as a roaring girl is to align oneself with the discourse that surrounds her, the "cultural imperatives that operate to shape, channel, and control [Moll's] eroticism" (Howard: 124). As the play's Prologue points out, the definition of a roaring girl is male-inflected: the audience member is identified explicitly as male as "up he sums/What he would of a roaring girl have writ;/If that he finds not here, he mews at it" (4-6).² The Prologue identifies several kinds of roaring girl before arguing that Moll in fact "flies/With wings more lofty" than any of the standard definitions of a roarer (25-6). Within the body of the text itself, Moll is referred to as a

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roarer by Sebastian (as part of his plan to present Moll as an entirely unsuitable partner to his father), by her enemies Sir Alexander and Trapdoor, and by one of the cutpurses. It is only in the final scene that Moll refers to herself as a roaring girl in the context of playing a trick on Sir Alexander dependent on his dislike of her public persona, suggesting that her self-definition is here an appropriation of his language rather than her own choice. Finally, although Moll delivers the Epilogue, her reference in the final four lines to another Roaring Girl distances the male speaker from the “real” Mary Frith, who “some few days hence/Shall on this stage give larger recompence” (35-6). Critical opinion is divided on how the detraction of Moll within the play is to be interpreted: Jean Howard for example argues that the play’s achievement resides in the performance of Moll’s resistance to “the terms her society sets for her... She can imagine enduring public humiliation for female transgression as long as she can defiantly exhibit her viol” (125). Pascale Aebischer, conversely, argues that Moll’s calls for freedom come at the cost of “a renunciation of sex ... [t]he price of Moll’s freedom is her exclusion from the happy resolution in marriage” (125-6). Whatever the critic’s position on Moll, however, the *term* “roaring girl” remains the preferred phrase of the judgemental, misogynistic order for framing and situating Moll within a society that cannot fully accept her, rather than Moll’s own expression.

To apply the term without qualification to Moll raises issues. To extend the term to the women of *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil* is therefore even more problematic. Notoriously, the title page of *Arden* already codes judgement of Alice Arden in a way that does not mesh comfortably with the play itself. She is described as

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[Arden's] disloyall and wanton wife, who for the loue she bare to one Mosbie,
hyred two desperate ruffins Blackwill and Shakbag, to kill him. Wherin is shewed
the great malice and discimulation of a wicked woman, the vnsatiabie desire of
filthie lust and the shamefull end of all murderers. (title page)

The language of judgement and focus on one character's culpability is at odds with the content of the play. Here, the horizon of expectations generated by the title page aligns the play with didactic conduct pamphlets and moral literature, predetermining reception of the text as a judgement of the "disloyal", "wanton" and "wicked" Alice. The play itself does not exonerate Alice of blame, but is marked by "its lack of didacticism", seeing the story as "symptomatic of larger and considerably more frightening forces let loose in contemporary society than of 'the great malice and discimulation of a wicked woman'" (Wine: xvi). The play itself shares blame across a community and implies that Arden's own intractability and greed have won him enemies on grounds other than adultery, yet the title page maintains a clear line of blame. *The White Devil*, in its title, also condemns its lead female character, "a devil in crystal who at times appears to be a saint" (Brennan xvi), in a phrase that "reflects the attempt to contain the possibility of female change within a patriarchal stasis... [that] incorporates the possibility of female movement in order to control it, investing women's stability with moral values (Loomba 74).³ The transgressive changability or duplicitousness implied in the play's title, that is, already encodes a means of containing the disruptive or inexplicable woman. The play's subtitle specifies that this is "The Tragedy of *Paulo Giordano Ursini*, duke of *Brachiano*", ensuring that the short title (tied to "Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian

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Curtizan”) renders Vittoria the cause of *his* tragedy (title page). By referring to Alice and Vittoria as “roaring girls”, the Swan season participates in a similar framing strategy to the quarto publications, singling out Alice and Vittoria as the markedly unusual figures in their stories and inadvertently inviting condemnation of these women through their alignment with the condemnatory language of the early texts. As Dympna Callaghan argues, it is precisely the quality of roaring for which Vittoria is castigated in the trial scene: she “is damned by every word she utters because a woman who speaks has become a “public” woman and is therefore guilty of having public sexuality, like that of a prostitute” (76-7). Similarly, Catherine Richardson notes that *Arden of Faversham* generates shock “in its adulterous assertion and partly in Alice’s seditious boldness with household space” (109), suggesting that the play’s concentration on Alice’s culpability resides in her sexual and managerial self-possession. That Dekker, Ford and Rowley’s *The Witch of Edmonton* was later added to the season did nothing, of course, to detract from the negative connotations of “roaring”.⁴

The Roaring Girls season was nonetheless held up as an exploration of feminist principles at the heart of the RSC, made explicit by a short accompanying season of new work in *The Other Place*, reopened temporarily as an experiment in celebration of the legacy of Buzz Goodbody. Erica Whyman, recently appointed Deputy Artistic Director of the RSC, headed up both seasons and used the new work season – entitled “Midsummer Mischief” – to set out a manifesto that aligned both bodies of work. The four female dramatists included in the season were given a brief taken from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich: “Well-behaved women seldom make history” (*Midsummer Mischief*,

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n.p.). It is through this accompanying season, with its alignment of bad behaviour and “mischief”, that the Roaring Girls season needs to be understood. Behaving badly is realised in Ulrich’s quote as an important assertion of identity and agency, most obviously referring to the necessity of women behaving badly *according to the standards of a patriarchy* in order to effect meaningful change. The making of mischief, or simply bad behaviour, becomes a feminist act dissociated from simple moral concerns, as the disruption of male expectations and paradigms for whatever purpose holds up to scrutiny the structures of society.

The notion of politicised, disruptive behaviour resonated strongly throughout the Midsummer Mischief season but, inevitably, was more diffuse and inconsistently applied to the Roaring Girls plays. One piece of publicity in particular merits attention: a flyer for *Arden of Faversham* and *The Roaring Girl* entitled *Roaring Today*. This flyer mimicked glossy gossip magazines with its tabloid-style titles (in lurid shades of pink and yellow), its “shock” quotations and its rudimentary intrigue and alliteration (“FATAL FAVERSHAM: What’s going on behind closed doors in this quiet town?”) designed to interpret “real” life as a soap opera. The plays are both reported as if partway through their action: the reporters shed suspicion on the announced wedding of Moll Cutpurse and Sebastian Wengrave on one page and, on the other, report on Arden’s murder and insinuate Alice’s culpability: “We recently reported the possibility that Alice Arden was being unfaithful to her husband... but is she capable of murder?” Perfectly capturing the hypocrisy of such magazines, a sidebar then offers guidance on “How to kill your husband in 3 easy steps”. In this marketing material, then, the plays were made to

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participate in a culture of behavioural espionage in which society figures are scrutinised for the slightest deviation from morality or convention with an attitude simultaneously laudatory and condemnatory. The reader is invited to participate vicariously in the frisson of a daring break from society norms, while also being safely distanced from the behaviours under discussion.

Mischief, then, served as the shorthand for eliding the nuances and complexities of the representations of women in these plays. “Mischief” softens the severity of charges of murder and adultery and allies the protagonists with the voyeuristic reader who wishes to mount a similarly good-natured, confrontational challenge to a male-dominated society. It invites us to see women who are doubtless behaving badly, but whose bad behaviour can be read as a necessary challenge to the restrictions and expectations imposed upon them. Alice Birch’s play for Midsummer Mischief, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, offered a deeply felt outpouring of anger in a range of imagined conversations and situations demonstrating the resistance met by women challenging behavioural conventions (from requesting an extra day off to insisting on being the active partner in sex talk) and concluded with the matter-of-fact, spoken observation that

All jobs will be destroyed

And all couples broken

And we take over the airwaves, the televisions, the Internet, etcetera.

And we’ll eradicate all men...

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It failed. The whole world failed at it. It could have been so brilliant... Who knew that life could be so awful. (100-1)

Making mischief, behaving badly, roaring, eradicating – all of the terms evoked during the paired theatre seasons drew on an underlying sense of the necessity of taking action, speaking up, challenging and fighting back – within marriage, within a court, within a workplace, within discourse.

Depending on one's viewpoint, the "roaring girls" were so tagged either as an unconscious condemnation of their aberrant behaviour or as an acknowledgement of their need to roar. As the poison began to work on Bracciano in *The White Devil*, his cry of "How miserable a thing it is to die / 'Mongst women howling!" (5.3.37-8) refigured "roaring" as "howling" from a male perspective, implicitly calling for the silencing of women at the moment of his final, most important performance and contributing to the silencing identified by Loomba and Callaghan as a gendered act of oppression. If Birch's play established roaring as the necessary action of women establishing agency within the world, then male attempts in the early modern plays to silence or condemn the speech of women resonated across the season, opening up debates about what behaviours were appropriate and how appropriate or inappropriate behaviour might be activated politically in service of female agency. To establish the coherence (or not) of this strategy necessitates looking more closely at the casting and artistic choices of the productions themselves. Unusually for an RSC season, the thematic links of this season were as much about the behind-the-scenes conditions of the productions as what was on stage. Each of the three plays was directed by a woman, and all were performed by a

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single ensemble with a higher proportion of female actors than is usual at the RSC. The ensemble was supplemented in each production by at least one additional actor brought in to perform the leading female role for a single play (in the case of *The White Devil*, two). This emphasis was significant too given that this was not only Whyman's first major project but also the company's first major exploration of non-Shakespearean early modern drama in the Swan under the Artistic and Executive Directorship of Gregory Doran and Catherine Mallyon. It was inevitable, then, that this season acted as a statement of intent in respect to women's roles both on and offstage at the RSC in this new era, and that this happened in the shadow of a main house season of plays directed by men, all featuring men in the titles and performed by a predominantly male ensemble made the ideological division stark.⁵ As the marketing materials made clear, the season was designed to enable women to speak about women, isolating and exploring superficially abnormal experiences from which could be extrapolated more general issues.

***The White Devil* and Keir Charles (the roared-at boy)**

The variety of genres featured in the season offered to showcase a range of situations and experiences connected by the shared participation of a single ensemble, allowing thematic doubling. As Marvin Carlson argues,

The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost of ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a

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phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process.

(8)

Carlson's influential model of "ghosting" is concerned explicitly in this context with the resonance carried by actors in relation to their past performances rather than with simultaneous repertory systems. Despite Coen Heijes's claim that no new taxonomy has been created to account for the contemporary trend for thematic "doubling" across a repertory season (53), however, Carlson's model ideally articulates the recycling process that enables the RSC's ensembles to build cumulative meanings between concurrent productions through strategic intertextual casting.⁶ For the Roaring Girls season the most prominent example was Keir Charles, whose role in the ensemble only became apparent across multiple productions. Charles – playing Mosby in *Arden*, Laxton in *The Roaring Girl* and Camillo in *The White Devil* – was cast by accident or design in all three productions as the butt of the Roaring Girl's roaring. He provided the link between Sharon Small (Alice), Lisa Dillon (Moll) and Kirsty Bushell (Vittoria), none of whom appeared in more than one play, by repeating his own performance in relation to each of them. In his arguments with his lover Alice, Charles's Mosby grew high-pitched, his swaggering, bling-laden persona eroding into emasculated whining as Alice took centre stage and determined their plans, rendering him increasingly passive. As Laxton, once again his self-possession as a finely dressed gallant was undermined, this time in the slapstick of a dapper Moll, dressed as a Victorian gentleman, tripping and besting him, leaving the emasculated 'lack-stone' flailing on the floor at the feet of the roaring girl.⁷ And while Charles's nervous Camillo might have commanded a little more sympathy

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than his other roles as he pleaded pathetically with his adulterous wife for her attention, the dynamic of the performance cast him as spineless and impotent in relation to the composed and confident Vittoria. The leading women were thus able to establish their roaring in relation to a fixed male presence, creating “performative echoes” through the “ghosted pattern of physical interaction” (Carlson 95).

Charles’s choice to pitch his voice high and paint himself across all three roles as a pathetic man whose initial bravado was readily transparent was telling of the wider aims of this season. By repeatedly positioning Charles as the roared-at boy, the object of derision and emasculation, the central themes of the project were realised on a microcosmic level in the repeated image of a woman overturning a man while he attempted to exercise male privilege. Charles’s role as the butt of a reiterated joke about a constantly thwarted performance of manhood ensured any potential victimhood here (particularly in the case of Camillo) could be ridiculed through the articulation of the characters’ complaints as grating whines. This was the same strategy used by Birch in the opening (and most discussed) scene of her play, featuring a male character emasculated and humiliated by his girlfriend’s gradual co-option of active sexual language against him. Yet with Charles and his overturning established as a fixed point, the productions were able to take different approaches in their overall strategies.

Maria Aberg’s *The White Devil* created a world of male privilege in which women were controlled tightly. Although Vittoria was identified in publicity materials as the “roaring girl” of the play, the term might be better applied to Laura Elphinstone’s Flaminio. Flaminio was played as a sister to Vittoria, but a sister who had established a

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place for herself by becoming complicit with the dress codes, behaviours and machismo of the men of Bracciano's court. Against the wigs, revealing dresses and glitter of the other female characters, Flaminio wore simple black trousers, white t-shirt and black jacket, not disguising her gender but establishing herself as deliberately outside of the expectations placed on her sister. She echoed the resonances of Abi Zakarian's *This is Not an Exit*, another new play in the Midsummer Mischief season, in which the central character Nora is targeted by a manifestation of aggressive female self-help strategies called Gulch. Performed by Scarlett Brookes with a Scouse accent and aggressively pulled-back hair, Gulch counsels Nora

Listen to me. I broke so many heels trampling over the bodies; Everyone so sensitive... nearly broke me it did; all that banter. Lying there on the boardroom floor with all that broken glass in tiny little pieces, surrounding you. But I navigated that minefield. Man up. (148)

The boardroom-ruffling, inner lioness-hunting, self-assertive manifestation of Nora's personality embodied in Gulch offered a route into understanding Flaminio, a similarly "manned-up" figure navigating court politics. In opposition to her, Kirsty Bushell's Vittoria, in a recurring motif, appeared on stage in plain underclothes and looked up at a screen depicting her in full costume, taking careful note and then dressing herself to match. This stylised depiction of constraint extended to seeing an image of her own blood-stained body ahead of the final scene and, in preparation, placing a sachet of stage blood into her underwear as she dressed. In a none-too-subtle manoeuvre, Aberg depicted here the extent to which this society's control of women's behaviours leads

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directly to destruction of both identity and life. In a play in which, in Callaghan's words, "[f]emale characters oscillate uneasily between their functions as objects of uncertainty and embodiments of perfect truth" (65), Aberg created and moulded two women to fit into opposing categories of expected gendered behaviours and played them off against one another.

Aberg's choices divided critics: Michael Billington argues that Flaminio's "murderous misogyny makes little sense when spoken by a woman" while Dominic Cavendish sees a prescient comment on "women colluding in female subordination". Viewed in the context of Birch's play, the presentation of misogyny seemed hopelessly pessimistic. Vittoria's convent was imagined as an asylum where drugged female prisoners slumped in state-controlled passivity; Camillo's murder was played out as a sadomasochistic game perverted, in which Flaminio took over from the faceless women who had been tying up their hapless client; and Isabella's death was shockingly objectifying, Faye Castelow writhing in her underwear and spewing blood. The production straddled the difficult line between the critical presentation of misogyny and the complicit performance of misogyny in a way that chimes with Roberta Barker's discussion of Marianne Elliott's 2010 production of *Women Beware Women* at the National: "By inviting or forcing the audience to turn away from Bianca's rape even as Middleton's characters did so, Elliott's staging might have been read as encouraging spectators to identify more closely with the social order that permitted such sexual violence than with the victim of it" (121). For Barker, realist acting attempts to articulate

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the complex psychologies underpinning the more lurid excesses of the Jacobean tragedy, as she goes on to argue:

On contemporary stages, gendered struggle and the oppression of women under patriarchy frequently emerge as the motors of such psychological readings, with realist performances seeking simultaneously to critique misogyny and to combat over-easy dismissals of non-Shakespearean early modern tragedy. Still, they often risk compounding both problems even as they struggle against them.

Realist acting emerges as a vital but equivocal tool in the Jacobean revival on the contemporary stage. (123)

The difficulty with Aberg's production was its accentuation of spectacle *at the expense of* psychology, prioritising the visceral nature of suffering in instances such as Isabella's death rather than seeking to articulate psychological complexity. That is, the aesthetic of blood and graphic sexual violence was geared not towards the experience of the individual but towards being illustrative of Aberg's nightmarish patriarchy in which its luridly dressed characters became over-simplified representations of oppression and suffering. Where realist acting was employed, it was to visual rather than psychological effect, arguably perpetuating the visceral experience of violent misogyny without offering adequate redress or comment.

Yet in the production's favour, if the visceral spectacle is seen as the visual articulation of roaring, then the approach is not without value in establishing a female scream of pain and anger as the underlying imagined soundtrack to the play's gender politics. The production's centrepiece, Cardinal Monticelso's public cross-examination of

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Vittoria, became a competitive showdown between the two, both appealing to the surrounding crowds, Monticelso with his condemnatory rhetoric and Vittoria with accusing fingers as she demonstrated his lack of respect for the law. It is Vittoria's vocal performance that makes her dangerous: Ania Loomba argues that she "recognises and exposes the attempt to divide the personal and the public by calling her trial a 'rape'; by claiming that the State and Church have 'ravish'd justice'" (107). The exposure offered by Vittoria, interrupting and threatening male explication of female sexual activity, became her key moment of disruptive performance. The production's ongoing entrapment of women, whether through words and rhetoric, through clothing, through the formal structures of this imagined society or physically through violence, was reiterated furiously at every stage, and in at least one respect there was an attempt to capture a human element to the suffering. In the early scenes Vittoria, Flaminio and Zanche were seen to be collaborative, conspiratorial in Vittoria's cuckolding of Camillo and relationship with Bracciano. By the production's end the same three women were seen on stage in a Mexican stand-off, torn apart by the conflicting pressures placed upon them, and the close attention to their conflict, debate and accusations became the production's climax, only secondarily interrupted by Lodovico and his men who enacted society's final destruction upon them. At this point, Vittoria's "I am too true a woman" (5.6.225) and "'Twas a manly blow" (234) and Flaminio's closing words to her took on a more potent resonance:

If woman do breed man,

She ought to teach him manhood. Fare thee well.

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Know many glorious women that are famed

For masculine virtue have been vicious,

Only a happier silence die betide them. (243-7)

As the two women died, Aberg seemed to want to raise questions about what being a “true” woman in this world meant, from the voices of women attempting exactly opposed ways of performing within it. That such performances were at all necessary was the subject of the production’s anger.

***Arden of Faversham* and Lizzie Hopley (the witness)**

The world of Polly Findlay’s *Arden of Faversham* was less explicitly concerned with the oppression of women and far more with the general oppression of capitalism. Ian Redford’s Arden presided over a factory warehouse churning out hundreds of small, golden “lucky cats”, the product itself charged with connotations of expectant fortune and wishing for money. In this imagined south-east (judging by the accents, more Essex than Kent), Arden’s commercial influence was felt deeply, whether directly over his many employees or indirectly by characters such as Greene, a tracksuit-wearing backstreet likely lad trying to carve out a little business for himself and finding himself blocked by Arden’s empire. Here there was no attempt to capture a sense of realist experience; almost all of the characters were cartoons (especially Charles’s Mosby, with golden pistol and rolled-up jacket sleeves, as if stepping directly out of a Guy Ritchie film). Everyone here was very clearly out for themselves.

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Sharon Small's Alice, in this milieu, was a trophy wife with beehive haircut, teetering stilettos and a picture-perfect smile, playing completely the role which had been carved out for her as she brought trays to her husband's work desk (the production eliding the professional and domestic environments of the play to situate Alice at the heart of the capitalist enterprise). Where *The White Devil* implied that its roaring girls were struggling within and against a performed identity, *Arden of Faversham* made this explicit: Alice dropped her smile as soon as Arden left the room and relaxed bodily, making visible the effort needed to maintain her charade. Her ability to perform extended to the other men she manipulated, seduced and coerced into carrying out her plans. Played against Mosby's feeble persona, the production worked to establish Alice's own agency at the heart of the actions, even to the extent of having her instead of Franklin deliver the Epilogue, thus allowing her to tell her own story. Small's own take on this is that "the real Alice has not been chronicled in the play. It was written at the time as a warning to men about their wives, to vilify her, whereas in real life, she most likely wasn't evil and Machievellian at all". Small's interpretation of the role thus deviated deliberately from the quarto title page's judgements, playing with a sense of enjoyment and shared audience involvement in the story of a woman in her mid-40s embracing her own sexuality and pursuing her own pleasure, aiming to create what Sarah Werner describes as the "resulting narratives [that] tend to emphasize similarities at the expense of discontinuities and to produce characters who appear to be universally accessible" (33). As Small puts it:

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I hoped audiences would be on her side at some point despite the plot getting so ridiculous. She is on the border line, morally but it's more a needs must, an improvised path and the more she goes down it, the further she must commit to it. It's going so fast, she doesn't see the real consequences until the end, until the naked truth of Arden's dead body and the blood coming out of it. Even during the stabbing, she gets so caught up in the continuing failure of everyone else to assassinate him, she needs to do the deed herself. That's why that lovely line is so heartbreaking - 'his blood condemns me and in gushing forth, speaks as it falls and asks me why I did it'. (“Our Roaring Girls Part 2 – Sharon Small”).

As far as a feminist treatment of the production went, the emphasis was thus on Alice's pursuit of her own desire to the point of stressing her own role in taking on the final act of the murder herself (including, here, stabbing Redford's Arden in the groin). Small's own anecdotes suggest that this here became wish fulfilment fantasy, audience members laughing and clapping their hands in joy as Alice finally took her life into her own hands.

The misogyny of the play was instead mostly demonstrated in its treatment of Reede. Here Dick was replaced by “Lorna”, played by Lizzie Hopley as one of Arden's employees. Hopley's roles across all three productions in the season ghosted three women attempting to express themselves from more constrained positions within the narrative than the main roarers. Although her roles were always small, the decisions taken in respect to them were significant (and it is perhaps not insignificant that the actor was also the company's appointed rehearsal room blogger). In *The White Devil* she

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was Hortensio, the character like Flaminio turned into a woman, dressed in fetish gear as part of Bracciano's nightclub-style entourage. Hortensio's role as a watcher of events was emphasised here, first in being Flaminio's confidante and enabler as the former leered after Zanche, and then later being the chief witness to the murders of Marcello and then Bracciano, reacting in silent horror as events overtook her. In *The Roaring Girl*, meanwhile, her role as the potentially adulterous Mistress Gallipot allowed her to join in with Moll's humiliation of Keir Charles's Laxton in a subtler way, establishing a silent rapport with the audience based on winks, knowing looks and a deadpan reaction to the controlling attempts of Timothy Speyer's Gallipot to explain and apologise for her behaviours.

It was as Mistress Reede, however, that the role and gender reversal was most potent. Mrs Reede's repeated appearances, haunting Arden both verbally and silently with reminders of his broken vows, punctuated the black comedy of the play with a recurrent motif of seriousness. Although Hopley herself cheekily imagines "Lorna" as someone who "works in Aldi and has 3 kids whose favourite meal is Findus Crispy Pancakes" ("Sahara Mouth"), Franklin's dismissal of her as "witch" resonated. The silenced onlooker played by Hopley as a shocked witness in *The White Devil* and a resigned wife in *The Roaring Girl* became here a silenced victim, a woman whose attempts to speak up for her rights were dismissed on gendered grounds by the play's powerful male figures. For those who attended the public understudy performances in which Hopley played Alice, the connection was made more powerful: Hopley observed that "[during t]he bit in the final speech when Alice Arden mentions Mistress Reede's

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curse coming true... [t]here's a little murmur from those in the audience who have made the connection that I usually play Mistress Reede" ("Sahara Mouth"). Despite Carlson's suggestion that "as last-minute replacements, stand-ins have neither the time nor the authority to put any significant stamp of their own upon a role" (76), the unique nature of the RSC's understudy system, in which the public understudy performances are usually attended by a local audience familiar with the usual ensemble, means that here the stand-in's body already carries resonance. Fascinatingly, Hopley finds that her duplicated body carries with it specific associations, combining in this performance a physical reminder of the dispossessed woman's curse with the words of the play's chief roarer.

***The Roaring Girl* and Joan Iyiola (the mute girl)**

Given the innovations and the relatively political confrontation of gender issues in the other two productions, *The Roaring Girl* treated its roarer in a very literal way. Jo Davies's production was set in London of 1889, achieving a specific confrontation with issues of suffrage and women campaigning for the vote, homophobia (Jack Dapper here read as gay, giving an added but relatively unexplored dimension to his father's worries over his profligacy) and sexual restraint, as in Hopley's frustrated Mistress Gallipot. Paradoxically, given that the play's title offered the most obvious opportunity for the RSC to tackle explicitly the resonances of roaring, the production's insistence on a historically distant period risked neither elucidating the play's early modern gender politics nor speaking meaningfully to the present. Lisa Dillon's Moll was presented as a

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woman quite literally out of time, her musical performances alone encompassing '40s jazz, '70s punk and '00s rap battles. The time-traveling feminism of this production risked rendering the resonance of the roaring girl so diffuse as to be meaningless.

The constraints of this society were social. The world of the play was presided over by David Rintoul's Sir Alexander Wengrave who, in another intelligent piece of ensemble casting, transferred the institutional authority he wielded as Cardinal Monticelso in *The White Devil* to a world of brandy glasses, repressive tuxedos and wittering old men none-too-subtly arranged in front of a series of museum cases. The setting was justified in imagining a time of transition, of open confrontation between a youth seeking liberation and an older generation performing and preserving tradition. Dillon's roarer here could be situated politically through her overt disruption of the *mise-en-scene*. In the final scene, having been brought in as Sebastian's false bride, Moll literally swung from Sir Alexander's chandelier and sprawled in his grand chair, legs apart and lighting up a cigarette. Yet Moll's disruption was clearly performed and even, in this last scene, jarring with what had come before. Moll's role in this society (and structurally, in this play) sits outside of the key narrative action. Instead, the production used the character exactly as Sebastian does – as an illustrative device designed to provoke and destabilise. Despite the particular associations of 1889 (the inaugural meeting of the Women's Franchise League), and despite Howard's assertion that Moll "is also associated with the righting of a great variety of other social ills" (127), Moll's role is political in what it symbolises rather than in its agency – Moll Cutpurse is not Emmeline Pankhurst. Throughout the production Moll responded in her own person to

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attacks and insults (notably those of Laxton), but her final “political” action in the home of Sir Alexander was a deviation from her normal behaviour and performed at the behest of a male character, Sebastian.

Dillon’s Moll might instead be characterised in terms of the current Everyday Sexism project as a case study of a woman who becomes the object of men’s unasked-for advances, judgement and aggression at every turn. The gallants fought for her attention, and Charles’s Laxton in particular assumed a sexual privilege with her that led to their duel being figured in terms of a self-defence against sexual assault, in which Moll turned Laxton’s aggressive behaviour back on him to his own shame, leaving him discomfited and humiliated on the ground. The roarer here was thus treated in seventeenth-century terms as someone who adopts a masculine role and also acts against male assumption of rights. Dillon’s complex performance juxtaposed her own performance of exuberant fun and triumphant vocal performances with moments of melancholy that resisted reading her merely as a wish fulfilment fantasy and saw her instead as someone who has taken a public position in relation to their own identity that allows them freedom but at some cost in the requirement to sustain that performance.

It was, instead, in the final of the main cross-ensemble performers that the play’s politics could be seen to emerge. Joan Iyiola was an almost silent presence across the three productions, beginning each play appearing to be an extra. Yet as each performance progressed, the productions layered and loaded her presence with meaning. For *The White Devil*, her relationship as Zanche with Vittoria and Flaminio was established from the play’s opening, the third person in a triumvirate of women.

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Flaminio and Zanche were in a sexual relationship, embracing and relaxing together to watch Vittoria and Bracciano's flirtation. By establishing Zanche's presence (even if unidentified) from the start, the significance of her role in the final movement of the play came into focus. As Flaminio murmured to Hopley's Hortensio "I do love that Moor, that witch, very constrainedly" (5.1.150-1), the established relationship between the two began to look rocky, and the final scene drew its power from the three-way disruption of the bonds of love and sisterhood established conspiratorially at the play's beginning. Here Zanche's presence became just as significant as that of Vittoria and Flaminio as the mutual recriminations and following slaughter occurred.

In *Arden of Faversham* Iyiola had a more unobtrusive role, initially scheduled to be simply a member of the Watch but upgraded following another cast member's withdrawal due to injury to playing Lord Cheyne's servant. Neither of these roles made an impact; but she became important in an uncredited role shifting the production's emotional resonance from the high farce of the first ninety minutes. Following the murder, as snow began falling from the heavens, Arden's body was left lying in the cold as Alice looked upon it, and Susan silently closed the ring box that Michael offered her. At this stage Iyiola broke her silence to sing a beautiful lament from the galleries. As with Hopley, the quieter women in this production were used to ground the play in severity, in contrast to the slapstick of the men.

Iyiola's silent presence was continued into *The Roaring Girl* in the invented role of Annie, Moll's maid. While Moll failed to fulfil a specific political role in this production, Iyiola did that work for her by ensuring Moll was not, in fact, alone. Holding

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a parasol over her mistress, Annie existed as Moll's companion, sharing silent jokes with her and ensuring that Moll's confidence always had a mirror, someone who could verify and support her as she went about her disruptive business. It was Annie who visually represented the suffragettes in her choice to follow Moll and, as revealed in the play's closing moments, to be openly romantic with her. To give Moll an escort is perhaps to detract somewhat from Moll's own stated independence, but reimagines her reluctance to marry as a reluctance rather to be in a relationship with a man. Iyiola's silent presence here was perhaps the most powerful statement this politically situated play offered as Annie seemed to be the only woman entirely free from the judgements and control of men – for even Moll acted on the request of Sebastian, and the wives of the city merchants remained defined by their marriages. Annie moved quietly, confidently and unobtrusively around London with her partner, being free rather than performing her freedom.

Conclusion

In the ghosted roles of Iyiola and Hopley, the “roaring” of the season was supported and underpinned by quieter methods of resistance and assertion. While the season risked isolating its dominant women through marketing materials and the characterisation of noisy and resistant women as individual roarers, it became clear that these behaviours in the plays did not appear as isolated phenomena but emerged instead from a broader-than-usual base of sisterhood, solidarity or social pressure, the denied plural of the OED definition being utilised here for collective purpose. The season as a whole raised the

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question of whether “roaring” continues to be an appropriate strategy, particularly when the word continues to connote noisy, bawdy and riotous behaviours that situate a woman who speaks for herself as necessarily unusual and opposed to a dominant discourse. This was made most explicit in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *The Ant and the Cicada*, which staged a debate between two sisters not dissimilar to that offered by Vittoria and Flaminio. Here, the pragmatic Selina, intent on selling for development her family’s dilapidated Greek estate, came into direct conflict with her ex-pat sister Zoe, who aligned herself with the land and with mythology to ensure her individual voice of resistance was that of a crowd.

It’s always a liberation of language. The tragic gesture liberates the language for a moment. A voice cries out for the old laws of burial, for the just rules of the house-oikonomos-economy. The one who didn’t see in time mourns in public. The one betrayed rages and revenges. We are all those voices. A voice that curses the economic picture of the world as no more accurate than those old maps with dragons. The voice that speaks out for a brief moment before it is silenced again. The fear that you feel at the end of a tragedy is the silence that follows. (41)

Zoe’s statement, made while holding her sister at gunpoint, positions the roar as the moment of collective expression through the voice of the individual, and the silencing of that roar as the terror of tragedy. In its collective acts of individual expression, the Roaring Girls season reopened important conversations about female agency and the company’s own positioning of women. Yet as the plays of *Midsummer Mischief* argued,

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the necessary work for enacting lasting change depends on the ongoing resistance and interrogation of the silence that follows a roar.

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¹ Quite what the RSC intended by "written for... women" is unclear, given of course that none of the plays staged featured roles written for female actors.

² All references to the texts of *Arden of Faversham*, *The Roaring Girl* and *The White Devil* are taken from *English Renaissance Drama: An Anthology*, eds David Bevington et al. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.

³ Brennan notes, however, that other critics have identified the 'white devil' with Flaminio, a potentially interesting implication given this production's regendering of that character (xvi).

⁴ The late opening of *The Witch of Edmonton* made it unavailable for discussion in time for this article.

⁵ Sarah Werner (50-68) offers a contrast through her constructive overview of the institutional wrangling over the “RSC Women’s Group” in the mid 1980s and the embedded “paternalism” of the company during that period (55).

⁶ Heijes’s article creates its own taxonomy of doubling to account for the unusually integrated use of thematic doubling across the eight plays of Michael Boyd’s Histories Cycle in 2006-08. Given that cycle’s explicit integration of ghosts across the eight plays, however, Carlson’s model seems even more pertinent.

⁷ The pun is made explicit in Paul A. Mulholland’s Revels edition (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987), 73, and emphasised by Sir Alexander at 1.2.55-6: “Furnish Master Laxton / With what he wants – a stone – a stool, I would say”.