

# "Playing the Men": Ellen Tree, Fanny Kemble, and Theatrical Constructions of Gender

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## Abstract

Ellen Tree, the first English performer to regularly play tragic male roles, initiated a nineteenth-century Anglo-American convention in which many women performers played a limited number of tragic male roles, primarily Romeo and Hamlet. Nineteenth-century women's performances of tragic male characters point to multiple tensions and fissures in the understanding and representation of gender in theater. Tree's negotiation of these tensions and her decisions about how, and in what contexts, to play tragic male roles indicate her awareness of the ways in which shifting social perspectives on gender might be accommodated in her stage representations. She followed her enthusiastic and romantic Romeo with Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Ion*, whose dignified and "classical" character offered a kind of idealized and unsexualized masculinity that was not too deceptively "realistic." Thirty years after she had first performed Romeo with Fanny Kemble as Juliet, Tree attended several of Kemble's public readings of Shakespeare, in which Kemble read all the roles. Tree expressed a combination of admiration and disquiet at the way Kemble "read the men *best*." Tree's mixed emotions about Kemble's reading register not only her recognition of changing social mores, but also unresolved tensions and ironies in Tree's own theatrical practices. Audience responses to Kemble's readings show astonishment at her intensity and emotionality, particularly her strikingly convincing readings of male characters. These strong audience reactions to Kemble's readings of Shakespeare's plays suggest that the expressions of emotionality possible in public reading could be perceived as more dangerously exciting than stylized and conventional stage performances of the period. Kemble had often criticized acting as overly emotional, and considered stage performance to be less respectable and less intellectual than reading plays aloud without costumes or stage action. Yet Tree, who had performed regularly onstage for over forty years, was shocked by the emotion and lack of restraint in Fanny Kemble's reading. The contradictions and ironies in responses to the stage performances and readings of Tree and Kemble indicate they were both judged for exceeding social expectations of womanly restraint, even as they felt, expressed, and responded to strong emotion in both reading and performance.

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In 1832, Ellen Tree played Romeo in a single performance at Covent Garden Theatre, with Fanny Kemble as Juliet. Four years later, also at Covent Garden, Tree performed Ion, the tragic hero of Thomas Noon Talfourd's new play of the same name, in a short run. Tree was the first English woman to play tragic male roles repeatedly, and influenced a number of later performers, initiating a nineteenth-century Anglo-American convention in which many women performers played a limited number of tragic male roles.<sup>1</sup> Tree's decision to play Romeo and Ion can be seen as an effort to expand her range as a performer and to explore, in a tentative way, dramatic representations of masculinity on the nineteenth-century stage. Tree played Romeo only once in England, and at least twice during her tour of the United States from 1836 to 1839. Tree had a greater professional investment in the role of Ion, however, which she played repeatedly, both in England and in the United States, until at least the late 1840s.

Nineteenth-century women's performances of tragic male characters direct our attention to tensions and fissures in the era's understanding and representation of gender in theater. Tree's negotiation of these tensions and her decisions about how, and in what contexts, to play tragic male roles indicate that throughout her career, she was aware of the ways in which shifting social perspectives on gender might be accommodated in her stage representations. In youth she demonstrated an interest in experimental and daring performances. Her enthusiastic and romantic Romeo was followed by Ion, whose dignified and "classical" character offered a kind of idealized masculinity that was not too deceptively "realistic." Later in her career, she became known for representations of Shakespeare's cross-dressing characters, Viola and Rosalind, that emphasized those characters' taste, refinement, and essential "womanliness." In her performances of male characters and cross-dressed female characters, Tree constructed an idealized and stylized representation of "masculinity" that also incorporated elements of "womanliness" — such as delicacy, modesty, and restraint — that were important to nineteenth-century culture.

In her later years, however, Tree expressed mixed emotions about the appropriate ways of representing masculinity and womanliness dramatically. Thirty years after she had first performed Romeo with Fanny Kemble, Tree attended several of Kemble's public readings of Shakespeare, in which Kemble read all the roles. In a letter to her husband written over several days in April 1863, Tree expressed a combination of admiration and disquiet at the way Kemble "read the men best." Of Kemble's Falstaff, Tree says, "it is *too gross* — it was to me painful — yet clever" (quoted in Carson 1945, "Introduction," 38). Tree's mixed emotions about Kemble's reading not only register her recognition of changing and often contradictory social mores, but also point to unresolved tensions and ironies in Tree's own theatrical practices throughout her career.

These tensions are also indicated in Tree's entry in the nineteenth-century *Dictionary of National Biography*, which emphasizes that she "was essentially womanly in her art" (*DNB* 1892, 30.266). The *DNB* entry mentions her one English performance of Romeo in passing without reference to her many performances of Ion, erasing from an otherwise exhaustive list a role Tree had played much more often than Romeo. Retrospectively at least, even the noble Ion might have become a problematic character, difficult to assimilate with the "essentially womanly . . . art" that the writer believes defined Tree's career. This critic's investment in Tree's "womanliness" superseded the more complex arc of her dramatic representations, but may also have registered a change in mores, as indicated by Tree's discomfort with Fanny Kemble's convincing readings of male characters. That Tree's influential early performances of Ion were passed over in the retrospective account of her career suggests that not only Tree, but also her society, had changed. Fanny Kemble herself had expressed anxiety about the propriety of theatrical acting, which was traditionally considered less respectable and less intellectual than reading plays without costumes or stage action and representation. Yet Fanny Kemble's readings of Shakespeare's plays induced strong emotional reactions, in Tree as well as in other audience members, suggesting that the expressions of emotionality possible in reading aloud could be perceived as even more dangerously exciting than reactions to stylized and conventional stage performances.

### Ellen Tree

Ellen Tree (1805-1880) was a successful and innovative professional performer who began acting about 1823. Little is known of her early life. The nineteenth-century *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Tree says that she had three sisters who also performed, two of whom retired from the stage after marriage to men outside the theater. Another sister was Mrs. Quin, "a dancer of Drury Lane" (*DNB* 1892, 30.265). Ellen Tree's early career seems to have followed a typical trajectory for the period. She started in small roles and toured provincial theaters, where she learned and performed lead characters in the standard repertory. She began acting regularly in London theaters about 1826. She is described as a "debutant" in the *Opera Glass* of 2 October, 1826 and is named on a Drury Lane playbill of 18 October, 1826.<sup>2</sup> By the 1830s, as a performer, Ellen Tree was independent and exploratory. In addition to creating Romeo and Ion as characters that women performers might play, she took a wide range of other roles, both from the standard repertory and from new plays. She toured the United States independently for almost three years, from September 1836 until 1839, returning to England with the then very substantial sum of twelve thousand pounds (Carson 1945, 6).

In 1842, Tree married the actor Charles Kean, the son of Edmund Kean, and together they formed a powerful alliance, acting together until shortly before his death. After marriage, Ellen Tree billed herself as Mrs. Charles Kean. (For consistency, I will refer throughout to her as Tree.) In some ways, Tree suppressed her independent identity, at least for public representation, yet she continued to attract admiring audiences and reviews (often better than her husband's). For most of the next twenty years, the pair led a series of acting companies, and many of Tree's surviving letters show that it was she who often organized business affairs of all kinds.<sup>3</sup> In the 1850s, at the Princess's Theatre, the Kean company organized numerous successful and influential revivals of Shakespeare. Richard Schoch's study of Shakespeare's historical plays as produced by the company emphasizes Kean's role in doing archival and historical research, as did the playbills at the time (Schoch 1998). Ellen Terry, whose first role in 1856 was Mamillius in the Princess's production of *The Winter's Tale*, was systematically instructed in acting by Tree and described her as "a joint ruler, not a queen-consort" of the company (Terry 1908, 13-14). In the 1860s, the Keans took a company of actors on a long tour through Australia, followed by a return visit to the United States and parts of Canada. Kean died in 1868, and Tree seems to have stopped performing then.

### Tree, Kemble, Jameson, Faucit

In the early, exploratory period of her career, Ellen Tree was associated, directly and indirectly, with several women interested in the performance and interpretation of Shakespeare's women characters. Frances Anne (Fanny) Kemble (1809-1893) and Helen Faucit (1814-1898) both played many Shakespearean roles, as well as writing about them retrospectively. Fanny Kemble's *Records of a Girlhood* (1879) is a lively memoir that includes anecdotes of performing; her *Notes Upon Some of Shakespere's Plays* (1882) is a more serious work. Helen Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1885) describes and justifies her performance practices. In the 1830s Kemble, Tree, and Faucit were linked in a number of ways, not least by their belief that representing Shakespeare's women characters was important and serious work. But both Tree and Kemble went beyond Shakespeare's female characters to explore male roles — Tree on stage, and Kemble in her later readings.

Fanny Kemble's parents were Charles Kemble, an actor who was for many years proprietor of Covent Garden Theatre, and Maria van Camp, a singer and dancer. Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, both tragic actors, were her father's siblings. Fanny Kemble wrote extensively about her experiences when she first started performing in her teens, as well as about the theatrical, familial, and social contexts in which she performed. In 1829, Kemble was urged to begin to perform to help repair the losses her father had accumulated in managing Covent Garden. She was immediately

a spectacular success in her debut as Juliet, which became her signature role. Her journals and memoirs record the theatrical, familial, and social contexts in which she performed, as well as the intensity of her emotional engagement in her roles. Kemble's brilliant stage career in England lasted only a few years. In 1832, she left with her father for an American tour in order to earn more money to repay her father's debts. She was an immediate success in the United States and "left an indelible mark on American theatre audiences and on American society" (Dudden 1994, 27). In 1834, she married Pierce Butler and left the stage. They were incompatible in many ways, not least in their attitude toward Butler's slave plantations, which Kemble loathed and criticized in print (Kemble 1863). After their highly publicized divorce in 1849, Kemble lost custody of her two daughters. She reverted to her family name, and after returning briefly to the stage, began to present readings of Shakespeare plays, seated at a table with a large book and taking all of the roles herself (Furnas 1982, 322-39; David 2007, 229-36).

In her youth, Kemble knew and corresponded with Anna Jameson (1794-1860), an artist and critic whose *Characteristics of Women* (1832), also known as *Shakespeare's Heroines*, included detailed essays analyzing some of Shakespeare's female characters. Clara Thomas argues that Jameson based much of her thinking about Shakespeare's women characters on some of the opinions of Kemble's aunt, Sarah Siddons (Thomas 1967, 64-68). Kemble's friendship and correspondence with Jameson also included discussions of Shakespeare's characters, in which Jameson attempted, as Christy Desmet (2004) argues, to influence rhetorically Kemble's on-stage portrayals of Shakespeare's women.

Jameson's writing and the performances of Fanny Kemble and Ellen Tree may well have influenced Helen Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters*, which emphasizes her early independent reading of Shakespeare, away from the influence of theater performances. Faucit's retrospective interpretations of the Shakespearean characters that she played are at pains to negotiate tensions between the "womanliness" expected of the characters on the stage and the autonomy Faucit found in the characters of the text. As Carol Carlisle's biography demonstrates, however, Faucit was not as self-taught as her own account suggests. She does not disclose that her maternal grandparents owned a theater or that both of her parents were actors. Her parents separated when she was young, and her mother, Harriet Faucit, lived with Faucit's "step-father," the renowned comedian William Farren (Carlisle 2000, 11). Farren's brother Percy tutored Helen Faucit in acting, and William Farren arranged some early engagements (Carlisle 2000, 22). By 1836, Charles Kemble was also a "mentor," who gave Faucit some of Fanny Kemble's promptbooks, inscribed "To you alone do these Parts, which were once Fanny Kemble's, of right belong; for from you alone can we expect the most efficient representation of them" (Carlisle 2000, 49).

Kemble and Tree performed with one another in *Romeo and Juliet* in 1832; earlier that year, Tree had also played Françoise de Foix in Fanny Kemble's tragedy *Francis the First* when it was staged at Covent Garden. Faucit and Tree also performed together in a company led by William Macready. Carlisle suggests that the younger Faucit, who started acting in 1836, saw Tree then and later as a "rival" with whom she was in competition for leading roles (Carlisle 2000, 45-50, 73, 85). Carlisle describes Kemble as another, victorious rival over Faucit during Kemble's brief return to the English stage in 1847-48 (168). Such an awareness of rivalry would be especially acute if Faucit was actually using Kemble's promptbooks as models for her own performances. Yet even though these performers were in competition for roles and fame, their writings and performances offered congruent interpretations and representations of Shakespeare's women characters. Tree's and Kemble's representations of masculine characters in performances (in the case of Tree) and readings (in the case of Kemble) explored stereotypes of masculinity in ways that attracted, but also unsettled, audiences and critics. Audience comments on Kemble emphasized not only her skill in female characters but also her exceptionally convincing readings of male characters. Taken together, Tree's and Kemble's innovative perspectives opened up a space for the representation of idealized, yet emotional, representations of both "femininity" and "masculinity" that were fluid and exploratory, offering a means to obliquely suggest broad and tolerant definitions of masculinity and femininity. Overall, the work of this loose network of female performers and critics strongly affected how Shakespeare's characters, both male and female, were conceptualized and performed in the nineteenth century.

### Ellen Tree as Romeo

Ellen Tree was widely recognized as an innovative and skilled performer. Unlike Kemble and Faucit, she did not write for publication about her conception of Shakespeare's characters' motives, expectations, or interiority. Tree's many letters rarely give a sustained analysis or interpretation of the characters she played. Instead, she focuses more on the theatrical effects of a character or scene. In her discussions of acting technique, in her awareness of audience response, and in her negotiation of her own roles, it is clear that Tree had a distinct idea of how she wanted to play roles and that she took a great deal of control over her own self-representation.

Tree's most significant artistic innovation was her decision to play tragic male roles on the stage. Early in her career, Sarah Siddons, Fanny Kemble's aunt, had played Hamlet on a few occasions in provincial theaters, but she did not repeat these performances in London (Parsons 1909, 31; Manvell 1970, 321).<sup>4</sup> After the 1832 performance with Fanny Kemble, Tree did not play Romeo or any other male role until August 1836, when she performed Ion, the hero of Talfourd's

new play at the Haymarket in London. She began a three-year tour of the United States in September 1836, where she was praised for many different roles, including *Ion*, which she performed many times, on this tour and again in the 1840s. Tree's precedent influenced numerous women who played *Romeo*, *Ion*, and other male characters, in England and the United States, particularly the American performer Charlotte Cushman, who made *Romeo*, *Ion*, and *Hamlet* staples of her repertoire from the late 1830s through the 1840s.<sup>5</sup> Tree's performances of *Romeo* and *Ion*, and of cross-dressed characters such as *Rosalind* and *Viola*, contributed to an interpretation of and discourse about Shakespeare's characters that emphasized the fluidity and performativity of gender, while also recognizing social constraints that limited the range of experimentation for both male and female performers. Her decisions about when and where to play *Romeo* and *Ion* indicate some of the ways in which societal expectations about gender constructed nineteenth century performances of characters by Shakespeare and by contemporary playwrights. Reviews of Tree's *Romeo* and her own retrospective comments about the implications of playing *Romeo* indicate some of the potential pitfalls for cross-dressed performances.

The Covent Garden playbill for 4 June, 1832 — a performance for Tree's benefit — lists a varied program. The main performance was *Romeo and Juliet*, with Tree as *Romeo*, Fanny Kemble as *Juliet*, and Fanny Kemble's father, Charles Kemble, as *Mercutio*. Benefits, special performances whose profits went to a particular actor, often feature innovative casting and a group of star performers supporting the person whose benefit was being held. In addition to the play, there were several musical performances, as well as an "afterpiece" of *Comus*, in which Tree was the *Lady*. The contrast between the chaste *Lady* and impetuous *Romeo* would have left the audience with an impression of Tree's versatility — and also, perhaps, of her chastity.

Tree's *Romeo* made a positive impression on some spectators. *The Tatler's* review of 5-6 June, 1832 says that Tree "makes a very handsome *Romeo*," adding that the writer "liked best the most impassioned parts" (*Tatler* 1832, 5-6 June, 223). An anonymous letter in the *Tatler* of 7-8 June praises Tree for having everything but "the masculine bearing of a man — all it wanted; her tenderness was as true as heaven and Shakspeare!" (*Tatler* 1832, 7-8 June, 231). The letter ends, "Miss Tree, in her conception and acting of *Romeo*, was a giant among pigmies! — A precious consolation! — but thank heaven, we have her as a woman" (232). Less approvingly, an anonymous newspaper review, on the back of the playbill of the performance in the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden, criticizes the performance as an "impropriety," yet somewhat confusingly adds that "*Romeo* is a dreadfully soft youth and therefore can only (we should hope for the honour of manhood) be represented by a woman." Nevertheless, "Miss E. Tree acted the character better than

we ever saw it represented."<sup>6</sup> The reviewer's doubts about Romeo's "softness" suggest one reason why the role might have been considered appropriate for Tree.

Fanny Kemble wrote later that Tree was the only Romeo she had played with "who looked the part" (Kemble 1879, 200). Kemble's Romeos were usually considerably older than she was, and on her U.S. tour, her father sometimes played Romeo. Catherine R. Burroughs points to many references in Kemble's diaries and memoirs expressing distaste for acting, arguing that "this unusual situation of playing her father's lover onstage . . . could have contributed to Fanny's association of acting with inappropriate, even scandalous, behaviour" (Burroughs 1999, 140). Although Kemble does not specifically link her anxiety to her performances with her father, she does admit to misgivings about the very nature of stage performance as manifested in Tree's unusual role: "The acting of Romeo, or any other man's part by a woman (in spite of Mrs. Siddons' Hamlet), is, in my judgment, contrary to every artistic and perhaps natural propriety, but I cannot deny that the stature . . . and the beautiful face, of which the fine features were too marked in their classical regularity to look feeble or even effeminate, of my fine female lover made her physically an appropriate representation of Romeo." Tree also "fenced very well." Kemble refused, however, to allow Tree to perform the traditional stage business of carrying Juliet's corpse "to the footlights" (Kemble 1879, 200).

In the contemporary reviews and in Kemble's retrospective comments, there is tension and equivocation — admiration for Tree's performance, but also doubt as to whether she ought to have done it at all. Such mixed opinions seem relevant to Tree's reluctance to play Romeo again for Covent Garden. In a letter to "Mr. Moore" of Covent Garden, dated September 1832, Tree refused a request to perform Romeo again the next season, asking him to pass on her comments to Mr. Laporte, the manager of the theater: "I assure you no earthly consideration will induce me to open in that character . . . to open the the [*sic*] theatre with it only for the sake of my acting Romeo would expose me deservedly to censure and do me more harm than you with all your kindness could possibly *undo*." Later in the letter, Tree emphasizes, "I never can — *I never will repeat the character of Romeo* . . . If you intend me to do any good in the higher walk of the Drama it would be *ruin* for me to open in a male character" (Tree n.d., emphasis in original). Tree's letter points to the complex and sometimes contradictory demands of stage conventions, management power, the performer's control over what characters to play, and the female actor's particular concern with her offstage reputation. The context of a benefit probably was significant in Tree's initial decision to play Romeo, because a single performance for a benefit could be indulged as an experiment. Critical responses like those of the reviewers quoted above, however, might have indicated to Tree



that there was less public tolerance than she had anticipated. Tree's argument that it would be "*ruin* for me to open in a male character" suggests extreme anxiety about her own social and professional status if she were to play Romeo again.

Tree's letter also argues that "Juliet should be any character or none," pointing to the primacy of Juliet in nineteenth-century theater productions. Romeo was an imperfect, unsatisfactory hero, while Juliet was idealized. Reviews of *Romeo and Juliet* with young stars such as Fanny Kemble or Helen Faucit as Juliet tend to focus on the character, and performer, of Juliet, with relatively little discussion of Romeo. In many reviews other characters and the actors who play them are mentioned only in passing, if at all. Juliet's centrality to nineteenth-century readings of the play is clearly evident in the analyses of her character by Anna Jameson and Helen Faucit. Both Jameson and Faucit imagine the character's life before the play begins, inventing events and motives unknown to the reader or playgoer. Jameson's aim is to defend Juliet from any criticism of her impulsiveness and eroticism, while Faucit imagines Juliet's early life partly in order to play her, in an early practice of the actor's preparation later theorized by Stanislavski. Faucit's and Jameson's works of character criticism intersected with theatrical practices to depict an idealized, yet emotional, Juliet, as the character was played by Fanny Kemble.

In playing Romeo to Fanny Kemble's Juliet, Tree had moved the focus of the performance slightly from the familiar, and adored, figure of Juliet (and Kemble) to the more problematic character of Romeo, and to the transgressive performer, Ellen Tree. Her wish "to do . . . good in the higher walk of the Drama" suggests that Tree now recognized a demand for a moral function in the performance of idealized roles that would be undercut if she were to open as Romeo. Tree's refusal seems to have been accepted by the management of Covent Garden, where she performed a variety of conventional leading women's roles that year. But although Tree did not perform Romeo again in London, there are at least two records indicating that she played Romeo in the U.S. A review in the *Mississippi Free Trader*, in March 1839, says that Tree's Romeo "was performed better than any other lady could do, and in some scenes we had forgot that one of the other sex was acting Romeo" (quoted in Carson 1945, 6). A review of a performance in Vicksburg, Mississippi was more critical, and suggests why Tree might have refused to play Romeo again in London: "Neither the play nor the performance suited our taste. Miss Tree ought to eschew the pantaloons" (quoted in Orange 1983, 165). No comprehensive list of Tree's performances in the U.S. is known, and her itinerary can only be determined from brief references in letters, occasional newspaper reviews, and scattered allusions by her contemporaries. Hence, it is not impossible that Tree might have played Romeo in other cities in the three years she spent touring throughout the U.S. Tree never played Romeo again in London, but perhaps she felt more freedom to experiment on the road.

## Tree, Talfourd, and Ion

In 1836, Tree took another male role, Ion, the hero of Thomas Noon Talfourd's tragedy set in ancient Greece. Ion, which would become a standard role for Tree, was much less problematic for performance by a woman in the nineteenth century than was Romeo. Unlike the impulsive Romeo, whose suicide is a marvel of bad timing, Ion is politically aware, emotional yet sensitive, in love yet chaste, and commits suicide as a noble, self-sacrificing, political act. Tree played Ion in London in 1836, many times in the United States, and again after she returned to London in 1839.

Talfourd (1795-1854), the author of *Ion*, was a judge and an MP between 1835 and 1841, who was remembered primarily for introducing several early unsuccessful copyright bills. He contributed to a number of London literary magazines; among his acquaintance were Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, Robert Browning, and the actor William Macready. Talfourd wrote *Ion* over several years in the early 1830s, and first printed it for his friends. The title page of the first edition reads "For private circulation. Not published" (Talfourd [1835a]). Talfourd's "Preface" emphasizes that the blank-verse play, which had many declamatory speeches, was not written for performance. The "Preface" to the second, "private" edition notes that Talfourd had made some revisions (Talfourd 1835b). By the next year, Talfourd had published the play, and Macready had organized a production. The first 1836 edition omits the personal "Preface," but includes a "Notice" dedicating the play to the memory of his schoolteacher and includes additional stage directions. The "Fourth Edition" of 1837 adds to the title page a statement that this version of the play was "First acted at Covent Garden Theatre 26th May 1836" Talfourd (1837). (I quote from this edition as the "acting" edition.) Encouraged by the reception of the performance and publication of *Ion*, Talfourd went on to write two less successful plays, *The Athenian Captive* and *Glencoe*.

*Ion, A Tragedy in Five Acts* is set in Argos, in ancient Greece. Talfourd's 1835 "Preface" notes that he was inspired by Euripides's *Ion* for the initial situation (Talfourd [1835a], vii). But as the plot summary below demonstrates, Talfourd also drew on elements from other Greek tragedies, as well as on Greek political models. In *Ion*, the gods and the sympathetic characters criticize monarchy as a "tyranny" linked to disease. At the end, monarchy is to be replaced by an unspecified form of self-government. Although the critique of monarchy is set in the far past, Talfourd wrote the play in the reign of William IV, during the volatile years of struggle between the House of Commons and the House of Lords over the Reform bills. Talfourd's sympathies are not only with Reform, but apparently with republicanism. The revisions in the 1836 edition, for instance, emphasize that Ion's resistance to monarchy is the will of the gods. This political aspect of *Ion* may help to explain the play's particular popularity in the United States, though it also had considerable success in England.

As the play opens, Argos is in the grip of disease. Numerous characters discuss their disdain for the king, Adrastus, a "tyrant" who "holds his crimson revels" in his palace (Talfourd 1837, 13), while the people of the city suffer. Ion, a foundling who had been adopted by the high priest Medon, is now a respected young man entrusted with the care of the temple. Ion remonstrates with the king, who grants him an hour of life before being executed. In that time, Adrastus tells Ion that when he was a young man falsely accused of killing his younger brother, his wife and child had been killed by his father's servants. After telling his story, Adrastus sends away the executioner, and Ion asks Adrastus to "Let thy awakened heart" ask "the pleasure of the gods / And whatso'er the sacrifice, perform it" (39).

Ion returns to the temple just as a messenger comes from the oracle with a message: "Argos ne'er shall find release / Till her monarch's race shall cease" (Talfourd 1837, 53). After emerging from a trance in which statues speak to him, Ion knows that his duty is to assassinate the king. His foster sister Clemanthe, now his beloved, remonstrates, fearing that killing will alter his character. Ion meets with a like-minded group, who draw lots to determine who will kill the king, and Ion's lot is drawn. At no point is the assassination represented as morally problematic in itself; instead, Ion calls himself "a sad instrument in Jove's great hand" (81).

Just after Ion leaves for the palace with a knife, a messenger brings a deathbed confession by one of the servants sent to kill Adrastus' wife and child, revealing that the child had not been killed. Medon realizes from the circumstances that the foundling, Ion, is really the son of Adrastus. Clemanthe tells Medon that Ion is about to unwittingly kill his father. Medon rushes to prevent Ion from becoming a "parricide" (Talfourd 1837, 78), arriving just as Ion is about to stab Adrastus. At Medon's news, Ion cries "Father!" (84) and faints. When Ion and Adrastus withdraw for an offstage reunion, Ctesiphon, another plotter, kills Adrastus, leaving Ion as the heir to the throne. On determining that the people are still dying Ion agrees to be confirmed as king. The following day, he appoints wise advisors, exiles the standing army, and asks that should he die without children, the people will "swear to me / That ye will seek hereafter in yourselves / The means of sovereign rule" (Talfourd 1837, 116). Ion stabs himself, and as he dies in Clemanthe's arms, hears that "the pestilence abates" (119). His last words are "The offering is accepted — all is well" (120).

Talfourd's friend, Macready, created the role of Ion in the production that opened on 26 May 1836, for the actor's benefit. Macready's diaries show that he took considerable trouble over the staging of the play, and the stage directions in the 1836 acting edition presumably reflect his decisions. Ellen Tree created the small role of Clemanthe in the benefit performance, but had another engagement afterwards, and Helen Faucit played Clemanthe for the rest of the run (Carlisle 2000, 45). Macready's praise for Tree's talents — in his diary entry of 9 April, 1836 — and his

thanks for her willingness to take part in his benefit nevertheless were qualified only a few weeks later (Macready 1912, 1:291). His diary of 14 June 1836 records his response to the news that Tree would be playing Ion in another production:

I was *displeased* . . . In strict justice I do think that having arranged the play (which Talfourd would not have done successfully) and put it upon the stage, it is scarcely fair, before the attraction is decided as past, to turn over my labours to any other persons . . . I cannot think it is possible that the experiment can succeed. (1:328)

Macready's irritation about being quickly replaced in the role he had created may have influenced his 8 August, 1836 characterization of Tree's performance as Ion in August as "a very pretty effort . . . and a very creditable woman's effort, but it is no more like a young man than a coat and waistcoat are" (1:340). On 27 August 1836, when he was again preparing to play Ion, Macready outlines his critical responses in more detail:

Rehearsed Ion, which I no longer feel pleasure in performing. I feel, I fancy, rather *dégouté* with Talfourd's "delight" at seeing Miss Tree's appearance in the part; if it is the author's feeling that it is the nasty sort of epicene animal which a woman so dressed up renders it, I am very loth to appear in it. (1:340)

Macready's disgust with Tree's performance of a male role, and with Talfourd's "delight," did not prevent him from writing to her on 22 September, 1836 to offer to play Adrastus to her Ion for her "farewell Benefit": "I was glad I had done it, as a kind thing to her" (1:342).

In contrast to Macready's mixed feelings, some reviews of Tree were quite enthusiastic. A review in *The Athenaeum* of 6 August 1836 praises her "graceful and spirited performance . . . the carriage she assumes is more like a man than that of any other female we ever remember to have seen on the stage; and the ever presence of real, with the total absence of *mock* modesty, make the illusion complete." The reviewer's impression was undercut, however, in the last act, "where the great length of the imperial robes caused by a close adherence to classical costume, gives them too much the appearance of petticoats" (*Athenaeum* 1836). In this and other reviews, there is no disapproval of a woman who plays a character as youthful and unerotic as Ion, as there had been when Tree played the emotional Romeo. Fanny Kemble, for example, observes that Tree's Ion, "which in its ideal classical purity is almost without sex, was less open to objection than the fighting young Veronese" (Kemble 1879, 200). The responses also point to significant breaks in Tree's representation of masculinity. It is not only the character's "purity . . . without sex" that makes Ion a

character appropriate for a woman to perform. In addition, Tree's gestures and her costume disrupt the performance of masculinity, reminding viewers of her "modesty."

Talfourd praised Tree's performance in a new preface to the "Fourth Edition," dated 14 November 1837. After giving generous praise to Macready's first Covent Garden production as an "effort of art" that inspired "others to attempt the part" (Talfourd 1837, xvii), he offers thanks to the performers of the second production, and

most of all, to the original representative of the heroine, who now illustrated the hero, and who has made the story of his sufferings and his virtue familiar to Transatlantic ears. Who is there does not feel proud of the just appreciation by the great American people, of one who is not only the exquisite representation of a range of delightful characters, but of all that is most graceful and refined in English womanhood, — or fail to cherish a wish for her fame and happiness, as if she were a personal friend or relation of his own? (xx)

Talfourd's comments make it clear that he approved of Tree's performance of the "sufferings" and "virtue" of Ion; like the reviewers above, he also stresses the refinement and grace of Tree's "English womanhood."

Talfourd had good reason to be grateful to Tree, who did him the service of making his play widely known, particularly in the U.S. (Reilly 1979-81, 28-29). Ion became a regular part in her repertoire for more than ten years. In the successful three-year U.S. tour that Tree began in the autumn of 1836, she played Ion frequently in large and small cities — for example, in Philadelphia on 6 December, 1836 and at the Park Theatre in New York in February. Tree returned to the U.S. to tour with her husband Charles Kean from 1845-47. Records and letters held by their manager Sol Smith, of Ludlow and Smith, indicate that Tree played Ion in 1846 during engagements in Mobile, St. Louis, and New Orleans (quoted in Carson 1945, 11) and very likely elsewhere on the extended tour. *Ion* was so important in Tree's repertoire that, as a playbill at the Theatre Museum indicates, she chose to play Ion for her "2nd appearance since her return from America" at the Haymarket on 5 September, 1839.

The familiarity, as well as the social acceptance, of Tree's Ion is illustrated in the memoirs of the pioneering feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in a discussion of the campaign for dress reform led by Amelia Bloomer in the late 1840s. After describing vividly the "jeers and laughter" experienced by the women who wore "the Bloomer costume," Stanton adds: "After giving up the experiment, we found that the costume in which Diana the Huntress is represented, and that worn on the stage by Ellen Tree in the play of 'Ion,' would have been more artistic and convenient" (Stanton 1898, 203-204). Engravings of Tree's Ion show that she wore a costume very similar to the one she wore

as Viola — a light-colored, belted, knee-length tunic with pale tights. On the stage, Tree was free to wear clothing that Stanton believes would, on the street, be seen as "artistic" and only mildly transgressive. Stanton saw in the costuming conventions adopted by Tree for the virtuous Ion a possible way to ameliorate at least some of the socially-mandated restrictions of women's clothing while still maintaining social expectations for restrained and womanly behavior. Her perspective on Tree's costume for Ion also suggests how unmasculine, and how unthreatening to the social norm, was Tree's Ion.

### Tree as Rosalind and Viola

Tree's experiences playing Romeo and Ion seem to have sensitized her to some of the issues important to reviewers and audiences in the representation of masculinity on stage, and these insights affected her approach to performing Shakespeare's cross-dressing characters Rosalind and Viola, both of whom she played as very "womanly" even when the characters were in disguise. A *Monthly Repository* review of October 1836 describes Tree's Viola as "modest, finished, beautiful" (*Monthly Repository* 1836, 629). A review of 7 September 1839 in *The Athenaeum* praises her "feminine sweetness and gentleness of manner," but complains that Tree plays Viola "with only too timid and constrained delicacy; deporting herself rather as a modest young page, who admired *Olivia*, than with the saucy airs and raillery of a secret rival in the Duke's affections" (*Athenaeum* 1839, 686). By 18 November 1848, a reviewer in the *Athenaeum* says that the womanly Viola is now "traditional . . . Of all modern actresses, Mrs. Kean is the only one who presents it in its sweetness and its depth . . . Viola, with Mrs. Kean, puts not off the woman with her attire, but becomes yet more womanly" (*Athenaeum* 1848, 1154).

Although not as famous as her Viola, Tree's Rosalind was also associated with femininity and "womanliness." In 1851, the Keans presented *As You Like It* at the Princess's Theatre. *The Athenaeum* review of 8 February 1851 calls her Rosalind "original" because its "buoyancy, vivacity, and sweetness can hardly be excelled" (*Athenaeum* 1851, 171). (The same reviewer contrasts Tree's Rosalind with Charles Kean's Jaques, which was "marked by correct recitation and noble bearing.") This "revival" used the traditional acting text of the play, which included the cuckoo song from *Love's Labor's Lost* (Shattuck 1962, [vi]), although for a command performance at Windsor Castle, Tree offered to cut both the cuckoo song and the epilogue, "as she fears that which is usually addressed to a public audience may appear offensive at court" (quoted in Shattuck 1962, [v]). Here, Tree structured her approach to the text with awareness of particular expectations from her courtly audience.

### Performing Men and Reading Men

Tree's emphasis on representing cross-dressed women characters in terms of their "womanliness" points to her acute awareness, and perhaps her partial internalization, of increasingly restrictive social mores. It is surprising that in 1863, Tree, a woman who had been performing a male character on the stage since her youth, felt acutely that Fanny Kemble's mere *reading* of male characters was troubling. Carson quotes at length from a very detailed account of Kemble's reading of *As You Like It* that Tree wrote to her husband on 6 and 7 April 1863. She praises Kemble's Orlando, Adam, Duke, and Audrey ("certainly an imitation of Mrs. Keeley") and says that Kemble read "*portions of Jaques exceedingly well*" (quoted in Carson 1945, 38). She also observes:

There is something grating to me in a woman reading all the men, and straining her voice at times into a manly tone — but she read the men *best* . . . I do not think it possible for a woman to read comic male characters in Shakespeare and avoid a tinge of vulgarity and coarseness . . . but she cut out grossness very neatly. (quoted in Carson 1945, 38)

On 8 April, Tree attended Kemble's reading of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and found it

*a wonderful exhibition. It is monstrous clever, but shocking I think to see a woman, (a gentlewoman) so coarsely unsex herself — and I feel this the more / when I hear the melodious tenor of her natural voice in "sweet Anne Page" . . . . The room was not more than half full and not many Ladies . . . Her Falstaff I think is good I think for any one (reading) — wonderful for a woman — but it made me almost angry that she did it so well. It is too gross — it was to me painful — but very clever . . . I've wondered (after hearing her in Falstaff) where the sweet womanly tones came from . . . To me her doing Falstaff was as bad as a woman going on for a Clown in a Pantomime — It is such a coarse unsexing.* (quoted in Carson 1945, 38-39, emphasis in original)

Interestingly, these letters do not refer to or reflect on Tree's own history of stage performances of male characters, when critical responses to her own early performances of Romeo and Ion alternated between fascination and disgust. Tree's dismay at Kemble's success in reading comic male characters suggests that genre and plot have some effect on her response. Tree oscillates between admiration for Kemble's vocal and interpretive ability in the performance of *As You Like It* and reluctant disapproval of Kemble's success at reading "the men *best*." Tree's especially severe disapproval of Kemble's convincing reading of Falstaff functions not only as a critique of Falstaff as a character, but also of Kemble's ability to "unsex herself" to inhabit the role so convincingly.

By contrast, after the mid 1830s, no critic ever suggests that Tree had "unsexed herself" in her delicate and restrained performances of Ion and Romeo.

There are multiple ironies in the judgments that Tree and Kemble make of one another's representation and reading of male roles. Kemble admires Tree's appearance, bearing, and fencing as Romeo, but refuses to let her perform Romeo's traditional "masculine" stage business of carrying Juliet. Tree is impressed, but also shocked, by Kemble's effect as a reader — especially by Kemble's success in reading Falstaff and other transgressive male characters. Kemble's affectionate account of Tree's performance of Romeo, written sixteen years after the readings that shocked Tree, makes a point of emphasizing Kemble's own mixed feelings about the propriety of women playing men's roles when she says, "The acting of Romeo, or any other man's part by a woman (in spite of Mrs. Siddons' Hamlet), is, in my judgment, contrary to every artistic and perhaps natural propriety" (Kemble 1879, 200). Burroughs argues that, for Fanny Kemble, "reading represented respectability and constraint," in contrast to the emotionality of acting (Burroughs 1999, 137-38). The audience responses to Kemble's readings, however, show astonishment at the intensity and emotionality she could express through reading, particularly the strikingly convincing readings of male characters. While Kemble herself had often criticized *acting* as overly emotional, Tree, who had performed regularly onstage for over forty years, was shocked by the lack of restraint in Fanny Kemble's *reading*. As Tree's restrained performances of Romeo and Ion had brought her both criticism and praise, so too Kemble's intense and emotional reading of the whole range of Shakespeare's characters evoked both wonder and disapproval. The contradictions and ironies in responses to the performances of Tree and Kemble suggest how much they were both judged in light of social expectations of womanly restraint, even as they felt, expressed, and responded to strong emotion in both reading and performance.

### Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge the research support of the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada. For helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper, I would like to thank members of the Shakespeare Association of America seminar in Nineteenth-Century Shakespeares, especially leaders Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer. After Tree, a considerable number of women in England and the United States played a limited range of male parts — Romeo, Hamlet, the Fool in *King Lear*, and a few roles from the nineteenth-century tragic and melodramatic repertoire, particularly Ion. The American Charlotte Cushman, who frequently played Romeo and Ion during her career, was certainly influenced by Tree's example. Sarah Bernhardt, who played Hamlet in French, drew from a continental theatrical tradition, but



her appearances in England and North America were preceded by Tree, Cushman, and other lesser-known performers. It is difficult to document Tree's performances with precision because records and letters are fragmentary and scattered.

2. This playbill, like those subsequently referenced in this essay, is held in the Theatre Museum Library, Covent Garden.
3. Some of Tree's letters are included in *Letters of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean Relating to their American Tours* (Tree 1845) and *Emigrant in Motley: The Journey of Charles and Ellen Kean in Quest of a Theatrical Fortune in Australia and America*, as told in their hitherto unpublished letters (Tree [1954]). John Ripley surveys and quotes from unpublished letters from the American portion of the tour held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin and the Folger Shakespeare Library. Other unpublished letters by Tree are held by the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library.
4. A few other women are reported to have performed male roles after Siddons and before Tree, but these performances are difficult to document.
5. For discussions of Cushman's *Romeo*, see Elisabeth M. Puknat (1951), Joseph Leach (1970), and Anne Russell (1993).
6. This review is on the same playbill for 4 June 1832.

### Permissions

Eleanora ('Ellen') Kean (née Tree) as Ion in 'Ion,' by Alfred Edward Chalon. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

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