

# Gender and Empire: Performing Masculinity in Nineteenth-Century Canada

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This issue of *Theatre Research in Canada* responds to a challenging question posed by Jerry Wasserman at the 2010 meeting of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research. During one of the sessions, Jerry commented on what he perceived as the relative absence of panels addressing Canadian theatre and performance history, especially pre-twentieth-century topics; he queried whether this was representative of recent developments in the field. My first thought was “No, of course not. Many of us are working on historical projects.” But I realized that Jerry had a point. At that time, it was quite rare to see an entire CATR panel of papers on pre-twentieth century material. In the days that followed, I approached several colleagues about developing a session for the following year’s conference with the express goal of demonstrating that pre-twentieth century performance scholarship was alive and well in Canada. After some discussion, we decided to build the panel around explorations of empire and masculinity in the pre-Confederation period; this topic struck us as both important and timely in light of Canada’s post-9/11 involvement in neo-imperialist projects.

This issue features expanded versions of four papers first presented at the 2011 CATR meeting in response to Jerry’s call. Like that session, this issue aims to advance existing scholarship on gender and empire by examining the performance of masculinity in colonial Canada. We draw inspiration from the emergence of “the new imperial history,” a scholarly development in cultural history that remains attentive to political and economic events—the hallmark of “old” imperial history—while considering the emotional, psychological, and physical lives of imperial subjects, alongside those of colonial governors, military forces, and administrators. In collections such as Philippa Levine’s *Gender and Empire* or Ann Laura Stoler’s *Haunted By Empire*, scholars have analyzed how European imperial objectives both informed and were shaped by shifting gender ideologies at “home.” Such scholarship not only acknowledges the centrality of women in the construction, administration, and celebration of empire, but also asks how definitions of masculinity shifted in response to colonial encounters, conflicts, and responsibilities. This issue pushes the “new imperial history” further by emphasizing the importance of performance to the formation, maintenance, and disruption of imperial ties and colonial gender identities.

Though differing in focus and scope, the articles gathered here investigate how the imperatives of the British imperialist project informed the lives of the thousands of men who served as colonial administrators, military personnel, journalists, and business leaders. By exploring performances that occurred outside formal theatre spaces—city streets, private homes, battlefields, newspapers—these articles also push at the boundaries of theatre history scholarship. “Historically, most theatre work has happened outside of the institutionalized theatre,” Alan Filewod observes in *Committing Theatre*, but much of this “theatre work” has

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yet to be uncovered because theatre historians of the nineteenth century have, until recently, focused much of their attention on “building detailed performance calendars and reconstructing conditions of performance” (3). Although Filewod does not deny the value of such projects, he promotes a much broader definition of theatrical performance, one not delimited by theatre buildings or dramatic stagings. The authors here share Filewod’s investment in unearthing the lively complexities of nineteenth-century performance culture in Canada, particularly the complex relationship between individual performances of self and collective performances of belonging.

In “Romulus and Ritual in the Beverly Swamp: A Freemason Dreams of Theatre in Pre-confederation Ontario,” Stephen Johnson excavates the fascinating story of Henry Lamb, a pioneer settler who in the 1820s and 1830s fantasized about transforming the swampland of the Beverly Township into a glorious new city. Johnson skillfully demonstrates that Lamb’s freemasonic connections guided his plans for Romulus, which he designed to include sporting grounds, a concert hall, and a “first-class theater” (10). But in fashioning himself as a founding father, Lamb “misjudged his community” and failed to appreciate the dynamic performance culture that surrounded him in the form of “outdoor rituals and kitchen parties, tavern songs and mechanics hall meetings” (11). What emerges, then, is the story of a man “intent on the orderly, architectural administration of society in a world of improvised spaces” (11): his vision of civilization was ultimately incompatible with the realities of life in the swamp.

Heather Davis-Fisch also explores competing performances of civilization among settler-colonists in “Lawless Lawyers: Indigeneity, Civility, and Violence.” She revisits the Types Riots of June 1826, when several young members of the Family Compact, Upper Canada’s elite governing authority, protested William Lyon Mackenzie’s vitriolic editorials by disguising themselves as “Indians” and ransacking his newspaper office. While comparing this performance of authority and discipline to other folk protests and charivari, Davis-Fisch maintains that the rioters’ elite status and their “choice of *how* to perform their *civilized* authority [. . .] demonstrates inherent contradictions in how power was enacted in Upper Canada” (31). By dressing up as “Indians”, the rioters exposed the paradoxical relationship between “gentlemanly power” and “savage retribution,” thereby exposing the ruthlessness and violence that lay beneath the Family Compact’s civilized façade.

Where Davis-Fisch looks at tensions among settler-colonists in their pursuit of power and authority, I consider how the arrival of foreign acting companies provoked debates about gentlemanly behaviour. In “An ‘Unmanly and Insidious Attack’: Child Actress Jean Davenport and the Performance of Masculinity in 1840s Jamaica and Newfoundland,” I analyze the controversies surrounding the cross-dressed performances of the child actress Jean Margaret Davenport, whom her father/manager Thomas Davenport favourably compared to the recently deceased actor Edmund Kean. When well-positioned critics rejected this assessment, accusing Davenport of trying to deceive colonial audiences, they initiated heated discussions about “the responsibilities of theatre audiences and critics, definitions of gentlemanly behavior, and the relationship between colonial-settlers and strangers from the metropole” (51). By comparing reactions to Jean Davenport in colonial Jamaica and Newfoundland, I point to striking similarities in the way British colonial-settlers responded to questions of civility and masculinity, despite other cultural and social differences.

Roberta Barker likewise traces the transmission of ideas, ideologies, gestures, and plays across colonial borders. Aligning herself with the “transnational turn” and other recent efforts to trace the flow of bodies, ideas, and performance forms across national borders, Barker maps the transatlantic circulation of the “gallant invalid,” a character type that originated in Alexandre Dumas *père* and Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois’s 1833 drama *Angèle*. This figure was known for his emotional and physical vulnerability and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others. With humour and precision, Barker argues that “performances of this type shaped both British imperial mythology and an emergent form of Canadian political heroism” (69), seen most notably in the representation of General James Wolfe (this issue’s cover model) and the self-fashioning of Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

Two Forum pieces complement the issue’s thematic emphasis on gender, empire, and Canadian theatre history. The first Forum, “Canadian Performance Genealogies,” is an edited version of a round table conversation staged at the 2013 Canadian Association for Theatre Research conference. Taking as a starting point Joseph Roach’s concept of performance genealogies and Raymond Williams’s notion of the “keyword,” the six round table participants (Heather Davis-Fisch, Roberta Barker, Laura Levin, Kim Solga, Kirsty Johnston, and myself) propose a variety of keywords for approaching Canadian theatre and performance history in fresh, new ways. In “Women’s Theatre Festivals as Counterpublics: Groundswell, FemFest, and The Riveter Series,” Shelley Scott surveys recent trends in women’s theatre festivals. Drawing from Nancy Fraser’s articulation of “counterpublics,” she presents a compelling argument for the “continued relevancy of women’s festivals as venues for new play development” (103). Scott’s piece reminds readers of the importance of attending to gender equity within the theatre profession, supporting the issue’s overall emphasis on seeing gender as “a useful category for historical analysis” (J. Scott).



Writing now from my role as *TRiC* Editor, I want to mention some important changes and additions to our masthead. First, I am very pleased to welcome Roberta Barker, Susan Bennett, Erin Hurley, and Glen Nichols to our Editorial Board. Collectively, they bring years of experience as editors and scholars to our already strong board membership. Second, I’m delighted to announce that Michelle MacArthur will be taking over the role of Book Review Editor as of January 2014. Michelle will replace current Book Review Editor Erin Hurley, who leaves the position but *not* (thankfully) the journal. Throughout her four-year tenure, Erin has overseen dozens of reviews. Her conscientious efforts to cover publications in English and French and her commitment to soliciting reviews from a wide range of authors (graduate students, early career scholars, later career scholars) both from within and outside Canada have made a tremendous contribution to the journal. Thank you, Erin, for your years of service.

Finally, as you’ve probably noticed, the journal has undergone a rather dramatic facelift. For this, I am indebted to our Executive Editor, Barry Freeman, for spearheading the change and to our designer, Louis Duarte, for his fresh, innovative ideas. We’re thrilled with *TRiC*’s new look and hope you are too.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the support of my colleague, Stephen Johnson, who in 2011 suggested that I propose a special issue to then-editor of *TRiC* Glen Nichols. At the time I had no other affiliation with the journal and the articles for this issue were submitted for peer review under Glen's editorship.

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