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From Performance to Prison: The Case of Vera 'Jacko' Holme Analyzing Body Politics, Gendered Transgression and Socio-Political Identity of a Stage Actress, 1890–1914

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Abstract: In Britain, during the nineteenth century the process of identity formation of a female performer was conditioned by a challenge towards the pre-existing gender norms that underwent a paradigmatic shift owing to the 'new performative turn'. The story of Vera Holme popularly known as 'Jacko', emanates from this very shift. Holme was an actress born in Lancashire in 1881. Often known as the 'first female chauffeur of Britain', she not only embodied the social, political and the sexual, but also imparted it through personal and dramatic means thereby challenging the ideology of separate gendered spheres much before the ideas of the 'new Sapphic woman' and 'female masculinity' came into being. Using the case study of Vera Holme, I study the socio-political identity of a stage actress who embodied gendered transgression across a time that permeated from her public life to private life and vice versa. Themes such as performativity, political theatre, deconstruction of sexuality and body politics become intrinsic in order to decipher the sexual lexicon of the time that fettered women on the condition of being socially and morally deviant. Utilizing the personal papers of Vera Holme, I posit her forays into theatre and politics, within this context, that will not only complicate the understanding of gendered transgressions but simultaneously will throw light on how theatricality socio-economically 'enabled' many women to break away from the existing normative patriarchal structures including Holme.

Keywords: gendered transgressions; body-politics; performativity; political theatre; identity and labor



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1. Introduction

In Britain, from the late nineteenth century, 'modernity' emerged out of the perceived collapse of 'separate spheres' for men and women. Socio-cultural changes led to the development of an anxiety caused due to the friction between 'ancient' and 'modern'. This anxiety centered on middle class women's femininity and sexuality as Londoners grappled with what the new century brought along. During this time, theatricality became an intrinsic feature at the heart of women's political activism and economic emancipation. Feminist writers and activists started employing spectacle and performance tactically to challenge the pre-existing notions of what comprised 'womanliness'. Performance strategies often operated at an intersection of 'sexual', 'social' and the 'political'. Gender transgressions on stage by women ruptured the existing 'social' and 'political' structures at work. Thereby, bringing a woman's essential nature into question. This rupture encapsulated the representation of a 'performed' social self by an actress, thereby bringing her 'real' social self into question. By the late nineteenth century theatre articulated a subversive realm for an actress that 'enabled' her at personal and political levels.

During the Victorian era, performance displayed the reinforcement of pre-existing stereotypes in the theatrical realm where it was difficult to discern gendered transgressions and body politics, as the category of 'woman' was strictly embedded in a gender binary that upheld patriarchal moral strictures. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the process of identity formation of an actress through performativity represented

a transition that can be read as an emancipatory phenomenon which encapsulated the very idea of feminism. The creative labor of female artists assumed importance which was developed and sharpened through performance techniques. This transition further 'enabled' the female performers rather than tethering them to the pre-existing stereotypes of womanhood. In this paper, I study the transition of actresses during the late nineteenth century, which comprises gendered transgressions, breaking away from the normative patriarchal structures and the 'new performative turn' in the realm of theatre. I analyze this transition as emancipatory for actresses who eventually became active political participants serving various socio-political causes. This gradual process of change in the theatrical realm can be argued as an 'enabling' phenomenon rather than restrictive. In doing so, I aim to analyze the case study of Vera 'Jacko' Holme, among others, as her story represents this transition from the pre-existing gender norms to the 'new woman' of the nineteenth century that was steered by the 'new performative turn' in theatre and performance.

During the early nineteenth century, women in public professions, especially acting, were seen from a perspective of disdain and were frowned upon by the virtue of the public nature of their profession. Their creative labor on stage and socio-political engagement off stage were generally pitted as sexually flagrant, deviant and rebellious. Vera's case study encapsulates this transition and provides an anomaly to existing bodies of work on actresses by leading to a dismissal of identifying a female performer merely through biological attributes that is tethered to the sexual lexicon of the time. In this paper, I read the story of Vera Holme through the lens of creative labor that she skillfully developed through performativity during the initial years of her career. Her creative labor and experience in the realm of theatre ultimately resulted in active socio-political engagement at myriad levels throughout her life. It was through relentless theatrical engagement in the initial stages of her career that led to a twofold process of transgression for Vera 'Jacko' Holme. First at an individual level, as through her performance techniques Vera was able to transgress the normative structure of 'womanliness' and become 'Jack', a name she was reckoned with by her friends and colleagues in most of her personal papers and letters of correspondence. This was a link to Vera's creative labor and performance techniques as a male impersonator during the initial years of her career in touring drama companies. 'Jack' articulated the formation of Vera's acquired social self. Secondly, Vera's transgression at a collective level was through active political participation, especially in the suffrage movement as Britain's first woman chauffeur and later working for war victims in Serbia. It was performativity that 'enabled' her to dismantle the pre-existing structure of 'womanliness' at a personal level first and at a socio-political level later. Vera could mandate a kind of 'fractured' socio-political independence for herself. I use the term 'fractured' here to portray how her socio-political and theatrical contributions remained unaccounted for during her time and much after.

In the due course of this paper, I intend to highlight Vera's personal journey of gender transgressions as a result of her theatrical forays and underline that it was through performance that she was able to transgress gender norms which led to active political participation later. The methodology of this paper encapsulates a reading of Vera Holme's personal papers located at the Women's Library, London School of Economics. Holme's personal papers comprise personal diaries from the years 1911–1960, personal letters, political papers of the Actresses Franchise League, photographic sources, prison sketches and personal identity records such as driver's license, arrest warrant and certificates of awards accorded for Vera's restoration work in Serbia. A careful reading of the papers makes her story of transgression from 'Vera' to 'Jack' apparent, moreover, her stint as an actress and a male-impersonator that empowered her to do so. In the first half of the paper, I enmesh the existing historiography on theatre and performance to the context of 'new performative turn' and the 'woman's question' that steered a transition in the realm of theatre for an actress. In the second half of the paper, I highlight Vera Holme's personal and political journey that underlines this transition.

Through the case study of Vera 'Jacko' Holme, I aim to discern actresses' representation on stage that led to a process of identity formation. This process of identity formation of actresses through the socio-political lens of the time further reflected on the newly acquired identity of the stage actresses. This identity was not only a result of economic independence that actresses such as Vera 'Jack' Holme managed to gain overtime but was a result of the socio-political engagement of actresses through theatre in a culturally charged political sphere of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Utilizing the case of Vera Holme, I study her active socio-political participation which embodied gender transgression across a time that permeated from public life to private life and vice versa. Positing Holme and her forays in theatre and politics, within this context, will not only complicate the understanding of body politics but simultaneously will throw light on political theatricality and creative labor as an 'enabling' phenomenon.

2. Historiographical Meanderings and the 'New Performative Turn' of the 19th Century

Theatre as a modicum of cultural production challenges as well as alters the identity formation for an actress. On stage, the category of woman becomes ephemeral, that is, constantly evolving as per the active as well as the latent socio-political climate. It becomes interesting to read the cues and analyze performances as well as performance aesthetics such as language and costumes through this socio-political lens in order to identify the underlying layers of transgression and emancipation. Theatre in the late nineteenth century was reflective of a dual process for the female performer that encompassed gendered transgressions on stage and socio-economic independence of women off stage. Often, one leads to another, for example, a lot of cross-dressing female artists have gained significant popularity and socio-economic independence. Many actresses have, in turn, utilized their fame to further political causes such as suffrage through socio-political theatre. Therefore, it becomes essential to discern how performativity during this time became an instrument to 'enable' female artists.

Judith Butler's use of performativity hinges on the construction of identity 'that serve as points of epistemic departure from which politics is ostensibly shaped to express the interests and perspectives of women' (Butler 2007, p. 175). It also raises a pertinent question: is all social behavior performative? Butler stresses how social scripts are reiterative and that it is the repetition that results in the construction of a social category. Butler is invested in analyzing the performativity of identity and how performative acts chiefly constitute identity formation. She further says identity formation in relation to gender is not self-ordained or natural. Identity is manifested through sedimentation in the body of 'repetition of acts'. This complicates the idea of theatrical performance as a practice. If all social behavior is performative, how can we identify and analyze the performer? Moreover, how can we study gendered transgressions that form a crucial part of the identity formation of actresses such as Vera Holme especially during the politically charged cultural sphere of the late Victorian and early Edwardian era?

The existing historiography puts forth how the identity formation of an actress, moreover of a woman, is often circumscribed within the gender binary often obliterating the embodiment of gendered transgressions. Several conceptions of women's essential nature came into debate; feminists and suffragists argued that a woman's moral superiority is essential to serve political ends; at the same time there were a group of feminists who argued that a woman's self-sacrificing nature was a 'male-authored myth' (Eltis 2016, p. 213). This particularly brought forth the debate on what is the concept of womanliness that hinged upon a woman's essential nature, further highlighting the question of 'what a woman really is'. During the early nineteenth century, there was a lack of unanimity and coherence among feminists to arrive at a unilinear perspective as to where to fit in gendered transgressions at all. Cicely Hamilton argued,

"Practically every woman I know has two distinct natures: a real and an acquired; that which she has by right of birth and heritage, and that which she has been

taught she ought to have and often thinks she has attained to. And it is quite impossible even for another woman, conscious of the same division of forces in herself, to forecast which of these two conflicting temperaments will come uppermost at a given moment.” (Butler 2007, p. 175)

Hamilton’s argument reflected the changing notions of womanhood during this time. Much of this change was encompassed in theatricality, where the acquired nature of a performer assumed importance on stage. The formation of an acquired social self on stage often included gendered transgressions, thereby questioning the pre-existing and innate idea of womanliness. Gendered transgressions on stage are often fluid and without a strict point of signification. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the fluidity of gendered transgressions on stage and otherwise became intrinsic to conceptualizing the ‘new woman’. This ‘new womanhood’ or ‘womanliness’ was not tethered to the patriarchal normative structures and instead provided an outlet for the same through socio-economic independence. Aspects of performance, such as the language actresses employed, costumes, aesthetic production and so on, reflected the socially, politically and culturally changing ‘present’ that constantly altered women’s representation on stage. This could be identified, if the category of ‘woman’ is not considered, as pre-mediated and embedded in the pre-existing stereotypes.

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was a known fact in almost all quarters of public life that women in the public domain were a cause of moral anxiety as it ‘was nearly impossible for a woman to remain pure, who adopts the stage as a profession’ (Wiles and Dimkowski 2012, p. 260), as said by Clement Scott in 1898. This led to his dismissal from his influential position at the *Daily Telegraph*, but this largely summed up the perspective of society tied to the patriarchal moral codes. Moreover, the identity of a stage actress was strongly tied to constant scrutiny and disdain. It is interesting to note here that, during the late 1890’s and the early 1900s, there was a spurt in the number of docile and polite characters portrayed by women on stage. This often encouraged an overarching assumption in the public eyes of the ‘real’ nature of the actresses. Roles such as ‘Imogene’ in *Cymbeline* portrayed by Ellen Terry were tainted by the patriarchal Victorian mores and often considered as desirable and pure. Additionally, the overarching patriarchal notions regarding a woman’s real nature tainted the characters they were made to portray on stage which were often written by male playwrights. Actresses were given roles that made them complicit in the way their sex was presented on stage (Wiles and Dimkowski 2012, p. 265).

Hence, this period was marked by a transition that encompassed more and more women writing their characters and plays. This becomes a crucial aspect in order to study the identity formation of several actresses, vis-a-vis the ‘new performative turn’ in the realm of theatre. Personal memoirs become an integral cog in order to study this identity formation of the actresses. Historians such as Penny Farfan have emphasized the importance of analyzing women’s accounts in order to understand “how women developed alternatives to mainstream theatre practice and to the patriarchal avant-garde” (Farfan 2017, p. 138). Marjorie Strachey, another theatre historian reflects on women and modern drama, highlighting the connections that the feminist reviewers were making between the plays of the period and the wider socio-political reforms for which they were campaigning. The existing historiography on actresses’ socio-political role widely talks about the ‘performative turn’ of the late nineteenth century that brought the ‘Woman’s Question’ to the forefront. This performative turn becomes a crucial onset for this paper in order to contextualize Vera Holme who will be subsequently discussed.

The increasing participation of women in performance marked this ‘performative turn’. More women began to write their own plays, act, as well as become managers such as Lena Ashwell when she took over Kingsway Theatre in 1907 (Farfan 2017), unlike the early eighteenth century. In the subsequent year, a milestone was reached in the arena of women’s theatre: The Actresses Franchise League was formed. It served the purpose of a socio-political theater by enhancing all women’s theatre, which in turn served the larger goal of women’s suffrage.¹ Around the late 19th century, notions of performance and

performativity developed several new insights in socio-political practices especially the quotidian theatre. This 'performative turn' in the context of new theatre historiography allows for the resurrection of class as an analytical category as well as performance that is reflective of developments in cultural history (Yeandale et al. 2016, p. 9). It then becomes interesting to analyze performance as a tool for studying socio-political culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a moral anxiety centered on private theatricals as "too many women had supposedly succumbed to the dreadful temptation of regarding themselves as would-be actresses, seeking applause and some notoriety". Fannie A. Mathews' article, *Women and Amateur Acting* (1894), analyses the popularity of private theatricals so much so that "an applause that is too often too insincere and totally unmerited, leaves women glorying in a non-descript phase of self-adornment, which for lack of the courage to christen it demi-mondaine, we impertinently designate as 'actress-like'". Mathews hinges on the biological construction in analyzing the identity formation of actresses in her article in putting forward the argument of how acting as an occupation had become a 'literal profession' and was not anymore merely a 'frivolous amusement' (Friedl 1987). She further talks about the gradual professionalization of private theatricals that also contributed towards acting becoming a serious vocation for women. She particularly talks about American actresses and the merger of parlor and theatre that hinged upon the seriousness of performance as a skill. This considerably contributed towards the women's question that led to an appropriation of respectability to a certain degree by the middle-class women towards actresses. During this time, Sydney Grundy wrote *The New Woman* (1894) for the Comedy Theatre that popularized the usage of the phrase "new woman" at the brink of the twentieth century (Green 2016, p. 20). Bettina Friedl opines in her book, *On to Victory*, that similar yet myriad political interests acted as an integral cog which contributed towards the 'Woman's Question' and united middle-class women especially actresses who could now work together using stage as a forum for their professional and political aims.

3. The 'Woman's Question' in the Realm of Theatre and Politics

In order to study the female performer as a socio-political category, it is first important to understand the politically charged cultural sphere during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in London and to discern the debate surrounding the 'Woman's Question'. With the arrival of primitive film and half penny newspapers by the 1890s and surges in the political scenario by the activities of trade unionists and the suffragettes, the political climate was charged. The parliamentary struggle of the great Liberal government to lay the foundations of a Welfare State and the aftermath of the Boer War, bridging the old century and new, left a stringent impact on the 'Woman's Question'. The Victorian attitude entrenched in patriarchal mores had ancient roots. For example, in the feudal society of Norman England, women could not possess land and the property they inherited was taken over by their husbands post marriage. Victorian girls and women were home-schooled in order to preserve their womanhood and a strict distinction of public and private had to be observed at all spheres of life. Obedience and self-sacrifice were instilled in a woman's social conditioning since childhood. Family was the centrifugal force that dominated a woman's life. Therefore, the task of homemaking, childbearing and obediently serving her husband decided the magnitude of perfect womanhood. A lack of legal protection, vocational training, professional independence and socio-economic independence characterized the lives of Victorian women of all classes. At this point, women taking up professions, especially acting which required them to be in the public eye, was nothing less than a revolution that was criticized, appropriated and challenged in all sections of Victorian society.

Lady Constance Lytton's anecdote throws light on the importance of political theatricality that in turn embodies performance and identity subversion. This further serves as a critique of the then existing patriarchal mores. Lytton, in her account *Prison and Prisoners* (1914), reflects on how Victorian morals were imbued in ethics and 'preservation of ap-

pearances'. Lytton's conversion to Jane Warton, a working-class spinster, by deliberately altering her appearance and becoming one with the working-class women articulates as an example of acquired social self through performance. It underlines the degree of subversion that is possible through performance and can serve socio-political causes. Lytton adopts a narrative style to portray Jane Warton; however, Lytton is aware of the distance from the character at the same time. This is where her story diverges from that of Vera Holme and leads us to a pertaining question: Is all theatre political?

Suffrage became one of the important binding factors of theatre and politics that brought several women to stage, and performance transformed into a tool that could subvert the patriarchal denial of women's rights feigned in the law. Political theatre was thus, at its inception. In order to discern the identity formation of female stage artists, it is essential to analyze the socio-political theatricality during this time. Sos Eltis, in her article *Women's Suffrage and Theatricality*, highlights the contribution of Lady Constance Lytton in suffrage history for using theatrical guise to highlight the class-based differential treatment meted out to the suffragists as political prisoners. This defied the justice and humane treatment that should be carried out for all prisoners incarcerated. Eltis states,

"Lytton was first arrested in 1909 and was kept in the Holloway prisoner hospital wing and released after only two days on hunger strike because she has a weak heart, whereas her lower-class companions were consigned to the third division of the prison and offered no such careful medical observation. In January 1910, Lytton dressed herself as the working class 'Jane Warton' in which guise she arrested, forced fed eight-times without her heart being properly checked as a result of which she suffered a paralyzing stroke soon after her release." (Eltis 2016)

Theatre is the most public of all art forms and leads to the development of a unique relation between stage–society–public that invariably feeds into the 'political'. In the twentieth century, theatre began to challenge the archaic modes of thought processes that encompassed gendered relations. It indeed became more political, questioning the basic precepts of social morality as is evident from Lady Constance Lytton's example. However, it is essential to highlight Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator's contribution towards the transition to socio-political theatricality. Brecht and Piscator began to utilize stage as a modicum to propose socialist alternatives. Theatre depends on transcendence, thus, conferring a changeable identity to the actors. As Michael Patterson puts it, in a very Brechtian format in the introduction to his book, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, he says, "on one hand the actors must transcend their own individuality in order to assume the role of a stranger, on the other hand the audience must escape from their own self-centered preoccupations in order to become involved with the events on stage". This process of transcendence is conditioned by socio-political factors and leads to the identity formation of the actors. Sos Eltis highlights this while analyzing Lady Lytton and her narrative, Eltis argues,

"Lytton's narrative positioning can also be understood as a careful preservation of the distinction between actress and role, a textual version of Brechtian performance in which audience is asked to remain conscious of the theatrical pretence and thus made aware of the underlying power dynamics that are being represented and revealed." (Eltis 2016)

At this juncture two different strands of theatricality become essential to emphasize the intersectionality between stage, politics and women. This will further indicate the complexity of issues that theatricality encompassed by the end of the nineteenth century. The first strand includes an overview of the leading modern male dramatists whose work became central while talking about the 'Woman's Question', Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. In the second strand, I will analyze the formation of the socio-political theatre, problem plays and propaganda theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, which became an intrinsic part of associations such as the Actresses Franchise League and the Pioneer Players.

A review of the play “A Doll’s House” in *The Vote*, which was an official organ of the Women’s Freedom League at The Court Theatre in 1911, situates Ibsen, like many Victorian and Edwardian feminists, as a crusader for their cause,

“Like the great of all ages, Ibsen the reformer was in advance of his time . . . It is difficult to realize that A Doll’s House was written thirty years ago since the ideas it expresses is so typical of the-thought-of-today. Indeed, it is only the ‘advanced’ play of our time that has followed in the wake of Ibsen. The Doll’s Houses of the world are still Alas! Considered to be the most desirable residences by a great number of men and women. There is no need to describe the motif of the play, since every reader of THE VOTE has doubtless more than an acquaintance with such a splendid piece of feminist propaganda as A Doll’s House. . .”²

It is important to note here how Ibsen’s work was considered socially permeable to an extent that feminist critics took the familiarity of the audience to Ibsen’s work to a certain extent for granted. Maria DiCenzo says that Ibsen’s plays used to present in convincing and realistic terms the urgent social issues that concern women (Green 2016, p. 20). Anthony Ellis writing for *The Englishwoman* suggests that “the social drama of Henrik Ibsen marked a new era in portrayal of woman in drama. . . This new chapter of womanhood and this attempt to re-adjust the ideals to modern conditions of life and to modern thought, has been potent because Ibsen’s work is always dramatic and his women always real. . .” (Ellis 1909, p. 305). The press representations made it clear how Ibsen’s work affected not only the feminist theatregoers but also the audience at large. Bernard Shaw’s model of the ‘new woman’ or perhaps the ‘unwomanly woman’ was modeled on Ibsen’s Nora in ‘A Doll’s House’. Shaw, in ‘*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*’, his famous essay first delivered as a lecture in the Fabian Society in 1890, wanted to popularize Ibsen’s work, especially the construction of his female characters (Lorichs 1973, p. 18). However, Shaw had been questioning women’s position in English society long before he started studying and analyzing Ibsen’s heroines. Shaw is said to have written fifty-four plays that largely posited women in an independent and liberal light, juxtaposing them to the existing conventions, prejudices and hypocrisy of the late nineteenth century.³ The perspectives of these two playwrights become intrinsic to analyzing female performers in the late Victorian and early Edwardian era as it marks a paradigmatic shift in the ‘Woman’s Question’. This becomes central to studying the case of Vera ‘Jacko’ Holme and her transition to becoming the unwomanly woman or ‘Jack’, as I will analyze in the second half of this paper. However, before that, it is essential to briefly analyze Brecht’s and Piscator’s theatricality that was reflective of subversion at a very socio-political level which marks this paradigmatic shift in theatre during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

Brecht’s epic theatre was not only a modicum of political content but also ‘succeeded in altering the functional relations of stage and audience, text and producer, producer and actor’ as propounded by Walter Benjamin (Eagleton 1976, p. 65). Brechtian theatre was based on dismantling the central assumptions of bourgeois theatre.⁴

“The dramatic illusion is a seamless whole which conceals the fact that it is constructed, it prevents an audience from reflecting critically on both the mode of representation and the action represented” (Eagleton 1976, p. 67). This ‘complex seeing’ that Brecht encourages his audience to indulge into is characterized by being a reflection on rather than reflection of social reality. Erwin Piscator’s political theatre evolves as a direct response to antagonisms specific to a stringent capitalist regime. At the same time, it also aims to produce a cultural monopoly to its own strength (Innes 1972, p. 138). This becomes a crucial premise for analyzing Vera Holme and the gender transgression she embodied. In the subsequent section, ‘Contextualizing Vera’, I will be dealing with the socio-political context within which Vera Holme was brought up and how her theatrical forays encompassed a reflection on the then societal fabric.

4. Contextualizing 'Vera': Gender and Body Politics

The construction of socio-cultural identity was conditioned by transgressive gender norms that underwent a paradigmatic shift during the late nineteenth century as discussed in the previous section(s). During this time, women experienced the collapse of established, rigid and traditional distinctions between the 'public' and the 'private'. The formation of the new middle-class and new patriarchy imparted modified tenets of respectability, morality and the 'domestic'. In London, this was shaped by the newly emerging material conditions, which further defined ideas of feminine moral purity and superiority. This new wave of change was accompanied by the growth of urbanization and a charged political climate that led to the identity formation of the newly emerging actresses in theatre. This period witnessed the construction of a new gender culture that cannot be reduced to a form of choice, at the same time this paradigmatic shift is difficult to ignore.

The Victorian culture developed two distinct views of the actress: one posited her in the realm of the 'domestic' locating her identity within the home, family and relationships. The other posited her in the 'public' world outside of the home. At the same time, being an actress meant the embodiment of a changeable identity. The kind of class mobility that became possible for an actress was unlike any other profession. Performance allowed the subversion of the public sphere in drama. This not only enhanced the creative labor of an actress on stage but later led to women across classes gaining economic independence, financial stability and security like Vera Louise Holme.

The early Edwardian era witnessed a significant event in the history of theatre. For the first time, a formal Women's Theatre was launched. The major proponent and sponsor of this All-Women's Theatre was the Actresses Franchise League (AFL). AFL was an organization founded on 17 December 1908, which primarily consisted of female performers, writers and producers. There was a stringent socialist element in most of the plays of the AFL. AFL's play department was under the supervision of Inez Benusan.⁵ It was a fundamental transition in the theatrical space during the early twentieth century. The foundation of this league further complicates actresses' identity formation as it leads to an intersectionality of politics and culture. The actresses who were seen as dangerous and deviant in the Victorian era had become proponents of women's right to vote by the beginning of the Edwardian era. This dichotomy is central to positing Vera Louise Holme and her identity formation during the initial stages of her career. Theatre had become one of the few outlets where women had been able to attain a position of wealth and prominence that 'enabled' them economically to further become proponents of their own rights. As highlighted in a weekly named *Era*,

"While the masters of the profession exclusively remained male, many actresses had nonetheless been able to achieve the condition of independence which is desired for all women by so many advocates of female suffrage". (Hirschfield 1990, p. 13)

The story of Vera Holme marks the transition towards a new set of gender culture owing to the politically charged climate and the 'new performative turn' as previously mentioned. Vera was born in Lancashire in 1881. She was the daughter of a timber merchant and grew up in Lancashire. She remained close to her brother Gordon who named his son and daughter, Vera and Jack, after her. To analyze Vera's childhood, it is important to understand the identification of the body and sexuality as the direct locus of social control. As Foucault insists on the historical specificity of the body, at a fundamental level, a notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women because biological differences between the sexes are the foundation that has served to ground and legitimize gender inequality (Foucault 1990, p. 85). At this juncture in her childhood, Vera was yet to transition to 'Jack' or 'Jacko' and it is through her body that she would later assert social control.⁶

Women's bodies during this time were judged through biological functions that inevitably collapse into social characteristics. While traditionally men have been thought to be capable of transcending the level of the biological attributes using their rational

faculties, women have tended to be defined entirely in terms of their physical capacities for reproduction and motherhood. In the picture from Vera Holme's childhood album (Figure 1), one can discern the upbringing conditioned by Victorian etiquette that formed an essential part of Vera's childhood. Vera was schooled at a convent in Belgium. In the picture, she is seated with her brother and her mother stands tall wearing a quintessential Victorian gown. This picture is clearly reflective of the embodiment of gendered code of conduct embedded in Vera during her childhood that gets further entrenched during her schooling in Belgium. This becomes a crucial point of comparison in viewing her transition post her forays into theatre that I will discuss in the subsequent section.



Figure 1. Vera Louise Holme on the left with her brother Richard (Gordon or Dick) Holme and her mother Mary Louisa Crowe, Vera Holme Papers, Women's Library, LSE, London.

In an effort to avoid the essentialist conflation of the social category of women with biological functions, I would like to highlight how the earlier forms of feminism developed a theory of social construction based on the distinction between sex and gender. As Butler posits, the sex/gender distinction represents an attempt by feminists to dismantle the link between the biological category of sex and the social category of gender (Butler 2007, p. 30). According to this view of social construction, gender is the cultural meaning that comes to be contingently attached to the sexed body. Butler further says that when gender is usurped as culturally constructed, it is then possible to avert the essentialist notion that gender derives from the natural body in any one way (Butler 2007, p. 45). This becomes an interesting point to analyze the case of Vera Holme, as she could not be understood by being compartmentalized in a gender binary at an inter-personal and collective level. Much before the ideas of modern 'sapphic woman', 'female masculinity' or 'lesbianism' became regular notions used in everyday life, Vera embodied and imparted it through various socio-political activities that she undertook during her career as an actress, a male-impersonator and later as an activist.

5. Becoming 'Jack': Stage and Embodiment of Gender Transgression

At the age of 22, with only a tiny and erratic allowance from her father, Vera was compelled to earn her own living, and she chose the work of an actress and singer. This choice came naturally to Vera as during her childhood actresses such as Ellen Terry tremendously inspired her. Vera was very passionate about theatre and maintained a diary in which she described her everyday experiences, costume trials, rehearsals, plays and audience's reception of her characters. During the early 1900s, Vera had begun her acting career in full swing in London. In her diary, she mentions how everyday she had a very rigorous schedule. She would rehearse generally in the morning and sometimes would rehearse in two shifts interspersed with meetings with different agents and playwrights. Additionally, during that time she started meeting a lot of managers to get roles in plays. She mentions

how she was offered 25 pounds per week in 1903 for one of her initial roles that was a significant amount to be earned by women during that time.⁷ During the same month, she also met many famous playwrights such as David Garrick. At this time, Vera became a part of touring drama companies where she worked as a male-impersonator. It is through her exposure as an actress that Vera underwent a process of socio-cultural identity conditioning, hence, the title of this section, 'Becoming Jack'. The famous actresses of that time and an inspiration to many, Ellen Terry and her daughter Edith Craig, motivated Vera to take up acting as a means of earning a livelihood. Later in her life, she had a long-drawn relationship with Edith Craig, whom she mentions extensively in her diaries.

Vera's stage name that she acquired during the initial stage of her career was 'Jack', and this is probably the origin of her nickname, it was the name of one of her characters that she portrayed on stage as a male-impersonator. Perhaps, truly inspired by it, she adopted this name somewhere around the late 1900s for the rest of her life. Her friends, colleagues and relatives refer to her as 'Jack' or 'Jacko' in most of her personal letters. This gender transgression is apparent in her dressing style (Figure 2) and her short hairstyle that she adopted eventually throughout the later years of her career and life. It is important to note here how cultural identities are constructed through performativity that gets crafted into bodies. Here, I would like to draw from Butler; in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Butler talks about how the links between theatrical and social roles are complex and further highlights that although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions (Butler 2007, p. 519). In the realm of theatre, one can say 'this is just an act' and de-realize the act, making acting something quite distinct from what is 'real'. In the case of Vera, there is a blurring of this distinction as she has channeled the act of portraying 'Jack' to becoming 'Jack'. However, for 'Jack', I would like to say that studying this transition is important rather than reducing it to a monolithic reason. Drawing from Butler, gender reality is performative but in case of Vera, her gender reality is drawn from performance itself.



Figure 2. This theatrical publicity picture shows Vera in a suit and tie, working as a male-impersonator performing one of her cross-dressing music hall acts, *Vera Holme Papers, Women's Library, LSE, London*.

Vera not only embodied gendered transgression but also imparted it through personal and political means, thereby challenging the ideology of separate gendered spheres much before the ideas of the 'new Sapphic woman' and 'female masculinity' came into being. During her theatrical career, she became famous as a male-impersonator and was known for her cross-dressing roles; she also became a member of Actresses Franchise League and later the Pioneer Players. I have highlighted the importance of AFL's socialist theatricality

in the previous sections of the paper.⁸ This is the juncture when Vera transitioned into 'Jack', which was her acquired social self through performance. Therefore, from now on, I will be referring to her as 'Jack' for the rest of the paper.

The contours of the transition that 'Jack' embodied are difficult to discern completely as it does not establish a strict demarcation. It is essential to understand here that 'Jack' is not a radical choice, neither is it imposed on 'Vera'. Portrayal of 'Jack' on stage and channeling a character into her real life becomes an outlet for 'Vera' signifying subversion to a certain extent. Vera never mentions this transition as a life-altering event in her diaries. Perhaps, simply because the gendered body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, it actively engages in cultural conventions. For Vera, just like a play requires both text and an interpretation, 'Becoming Jack' in a culturally restricted corporeal space, enacts interpretations within the confines of pre-established cultural conventions, which hinges on gender binaries.

'Jack' was appointed as the official chauffeur for the Pankhurst's that made her the first female chauffeur in Britain. She was a part of the Actresses Franchise League and later became a member of the Women's Political and Social Union. Jack spent considerable time in Lochearnhead, Scotland, organizing drama productions and performing in the touring theatrical companies often as a male impersonator. I would like to briefly highlight Laura Doan's perspective, to emphasize the then existing notions, as she puts forth her analysis of how, during the pre-war era, mannishness in a woman was seen as an unnatural way of life. During this time, the knowledge of lesbianism was not 'common'. Jack gained a lot of prominence through theatre, and years later, she was featured in an article that was posted in the *Perthshire Advertiser* (Figure 3) in the year 1938 titled *Notable Lochearnhead Lady*, as by that time 'Jack' had moved to Scotland and gained considerable prominence in the arena of managing and producing plays; an Englishwoman by birth she resonated herself more with Scotland's scenery and history. Her house was situated on the bank of the Ogle and was named Allt-Grianach. After a brief hiatus during the Second World War, she resumed actively participating in the field of drama and produced plays in Scotland.⁹ This hiatus was marked by Jack taking up activism to support the cause of suffrage during the inter-war period channeling her sexual identity through the formation of her socio-political identity.

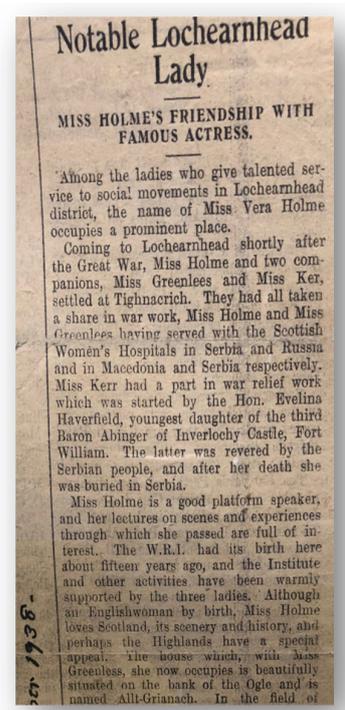


Figure 3. Article in *Perthshire Advertiser* highlighting Miss Holme's 'friendship' with a famous actress of the time, 1938, Vera Holme Papers, Women's Library, LSE, London.

6. Confining 'Jack': Analyzing 'Social', 'Political' and 'Sexual' Identity

As mentioned in the previous section, 'Jack' became a member of the Women's Political and Social Union (WSPU) in 1909 (Figure 4). She joined the Actresses' Franchise League and joined a group of singing suffragettes who performed at the gates of Holloway to boost the morale of suffragette prisoners inside. This is how Jack channeled performativity to serve political means and contribute to the cause of suffrage. Jack was later arrested for obstructing police at a suffrage rally and was imprisoned for five days in Holloway. She played an important role in the suffrage movement as a chauffeur to the Pankhurst's, the leaders of the WSPU. To understand 'Jack's' activism, it is important to study suffragist conceptions of women's true nature which is often portrayed in the suffrage plays. Suffragists argued that women's moral superiority and sympathy are required as a direct influence in politics; the problematic arises on the debate as to what a woman's 'true' nature might be. For an actress such as 'Jack', one can posit her within two distinct natures, one that is real and one that is acquired as argued by Cicely Hamilton (Eltis 2016). In Jack's case, there is a blurring of strict demarcations as mentioned above; therefore, her performed social self has taken over command which is clearly ascertained in her years as an activist.



Figure 4. Jack Holme is in the front on the left with other members of the WSPU in 1909, Women's Library, LSE, London.

During the suffrage period, Jack began an important romantic relationship with Lady Evelina Haverfield, which lasted until Eve's death in 1920. She was 14 years older than Jack and married to a wealthy baron (See note 7 above). Unfortunately, no personal letters have survived, and their relationship must be pieced together from what has survived, such as a single love poem from Jack to Eve. Eve was also involved in the suffrage movement as an accomplished horsewoman and had a masculine style. At the beginning of the First World War, Eve Haverfield established a women's auxiliary unit—the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR). There were branches all over London that trained women for war work, particularly in transport. In 1915, Jack and Eve joined the transport wing of the Scottish Women's Hospital and were sent to Serbia (See note 7 above). In September 1916, Jack became a chauffeur with the Scottish Women's Hospital. Since then, she worked tirelessly and very enthusiastically on her own all through the Russian advance and retreat in Dorbuja (See note 7 above). She was the house orderly for several months and was in-charge of the stables (See note 7 above).

Evelina Haverfield was head of the transport unit, and Jack was an ambulance driver. In a letter to Celia Wray and Alick Embleton, "Jack" describes very vividly her physical transformation which highlights her gender transgression at a personal level and how 'Eve' loved it: "I have my hair cut short and it is awfully wavy and curly, and I look like an impresario—Eve says—and she loves it" (See note 7 above). I would like to bring in here that it was only by the 1920s that experimentation in dressing and gender bending became pervasive so much so that one could speak of an entire culture, in a sense cross-dressing. Clothing styles were in a flux in 1920s, giving women who might later identify themselves as lesbians an opportunity to test their boundaries of sartorial expression without proclaiming sexual expression to the culture at large as highlighted by the author Laura Doan, in her book, *Fashioning Sapphism* (Doan 2001, p. 288). Therefore, for 'Jack' gender transgression through her acquired social self is evident at a political level where

she is taking up occupations that were strictly tethered to the male domain (transport) and at a personal level by undergoing a gradual alteration of her appearance.

Jack actively participated in protests and marches organized by the AFL for the cause of Suffrage. As a result, she was arrested for obstructing police at a suffrage rally and was imprisoned for five days in Holloway (See note 7 above) (Figure 5). She had an important role to play in the suffrage movement as a chauffeur to the Pankhurst's, leaders of the WSPU. In 1915, Jack and Eve (Evelina Haverfield) joined the transport wing of the Scottish Women's Hospital unit. They were sent to Serbia where Eve was head of the transport unit and Jack was an ambulance driver. In 1918, Jack was awarded the Samaritan Cross and a Russian medal by the King of Serbia for her Meritorious Service in recognition for her work with the Scottish Women's Hospital (See note 7 above). After the war, she helped to set up the Haverfield Fund for Serbian Children, and continued links with Serbia after Eve's death in 1920. In the 1920s, Jack moved to Scotland and shared a home with artists Dorothy Johnstone and Anne Finlay. The social, political and sexual identities she embodied throughout her career led her to gain prominence, recognition and success. However, her name is missing from the chapters of history, especially her socio-political forays and contribution towards suffrage.



Figure 5. Vera Holme's sketch of her solitary confinement in Holloway Prison which she hid in her pocket diary throughout her incarceration, Vera Holme Papers, Women's Library, LSE, London.

7. Conclusions

Women's history has egressed from 'second wave' feminism (1960s and 1970s) and has been on a trajectory for writing compensatory histories merely celebrating 'women worthies', thus focusing on the material aspects that shaped the lives of women. More importantly, there has been a gap within such historiography that has focused on women as a monolithic category rather than a multifaceted category as they were divided by class, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. Feminist historian Susie Steinbach (2005) underlines that the 'gender history' that stemmed in the 1980s was largely a relational historiographical trend that tried to understand the relationship between men and women, and moreover, how the notions of masculinity and femininity disseminated over a period of time. This strand of history writing accorded heavy centrality to the ideological thrust of feminism rather than experiential history of women.¹⁰ During the late nineteenth century, freedom from artificial gender roles and false ideals could only be imagined as a far-fetched possibility for most.

At this time, Vera Holme not only embodied gender transgression but mandated a socio-political space as well. Her story is crucial to studying experiential history and is situated right at the time when debates and discussion around the 'woman's question' had

already done rounds in the public circle. A ‘new performative turn’ became apparent in the theatrical realm with more and more women performers, playwrights and managers coming to the forefront. At the same time, female characters were written for plays in a different light by male dramatists such as Ibsen and Shaw. This was also the time when political theatricality assumed importance. Especially during the suffrage movement, a tri-polar interaction is witnessed for the first time between women’s cause, performativity and politics. Vera Holme’s acquired social-self intersected the charged political climate that ensued her gender transgression. She channeled this transgression from the realm of theatre, working as a male-impersonator, to the realm of politics, working as a chauffeur to the Pankhursts and actively contributing to the suffrage movement.

In most of the newspaper articles, Vera ‘Jack’ Holme is seen with the Pankhursts and Pethick-Lawrences, driving their vehicles. An article in *The Chauffeur* magazine commented that “Anybody who has seen Miss Holme starting up, changing gear, and steering in and out of traffic, will freely acknowledge her right to call herself a chauffeur” (See note 7 above). Vera ‘Jack’ Holme made this her own reality and utilized it to ‘enable’ herself. Theatricality served as an important tool for realizing what Vera embodied and what she could impart. However, her silence and absence from the pages of history hints at a restrictive representation that could be due to her occupation as a performer and her sexuality. Her theatrical forays can be analyzed as a twofold process: one at an individual level and the other at a collective level. At an individual level, theatricality made her familiar to ‘Jack’, whom she embodied for the rest of her life, and at a collective level, political theatre made her realize the importance of drama and performativity in putting forth women’s rights.

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Notes

- ¹ One of the famous collaboration plays of the AFL, ‘*How the Vote was Won*’ (1909), That featured Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John. In the play female stereotypes are redeployed from their customary theatrical settings. I will highlight this in the following section of my paper, where I analyze the case of Vera Louise Holme and her participation in the AFL.
- ² M. Slieve McGowan, “Ibsen at the Court Theatre,” *The Vote*, 18 March 1911.
- ³ Not delving in G.B. Shaw’s and Henrik Ibsen’s plays in detail, as that remains peripheral to the larger aim of this paper.
- ⁴ For the discussion see (Eagleton 1976) “The audience in bourgeois theatre is a passive consumer of a finished, unchangeable art-object offered to them as real. The play does not stimulate them to present constructively of how it is presenting its characters and events or how they might have been different”.
- ⁵ See Hirschfield (1990). The AFL was to server three functions, first, it aimed to educate members of the theatrical profession about the importance of female enfranchisement. Second, the AFL would take part in suffrage demonstrations and processions as a way of convincing general public of the justice of the cause and lastly, League would make the services of it members available to other suffrage societies for fund raising or propaganda purposes through the staging of plays and entertainment.
- ⁶ I will use both the names during the course of this paper as Vera adopted this name post her first theatrical tour. Her close friends use to often refer to her using either ‘Jack’ or ‘Jacko’ as evidenced in the numerous personal letters I have worked on in the Women’s Library, London School of Economics. Later, I would highlight this transition as an important aspect of gendered transgression that Vera embodied.
- ⁷ *Vera Holme Papers*. Ref. No. 7VJH, Women’s Library, London School of Economics, London.
- ⁸ See *Pioneer Players, Vera Holme Papers*, Ref. No. 7VJH, Women’s Library, London School of Economics, London.
- ⁹ Edith Craig had also been a guest in the same house. Later in her life she also becomes a stage manager to Edith Craig and her friendship with Craig lasts for over 30 years. When Craig was honored at Savoy hotel in London and presented with a cheque and a scroll with over 200 names of her friends. Vera Holme as present along with many notable people at the function that included Queen Mary and Bernard Shaw. Prominence.
- ¹⁰ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760–1914*, Phoenix-Orion Publishing Group, 2005. Steinbach provides a smooth amalgamation between actuality and theory. She not only delves into notions like, ‘redundancy crisis’ and ‘sexual double standard’ but also provides an array of sources to substantiate the limitations of women’s actions imposed through custom, law, religion and science.

She moves beyond the legal framework to politically analyze women's position in the realms of marriage, divorce, suffrage, sexual health, free sexual expression and venereal diseases. This period was marked by one of the most important changes that were the advent of organized feminism in social, economic and cultural aspects that shaped the feminist environment during the long nineteenth century.

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