At the beginning of Ben Jonson’s *Epicene* (1609) Morose’s friends discuss how sensitive he is to noise, in particular, the cries of ‘fishwives and orange-women.’ In a play that satirises women, and particularly vocal ones, the inclusion of these street criers as abhorrent to Morose hardly comes as a surprise. However, they are also significant in that they problematise the way in which we interpret how women engaged with Early Modern theatre. In this Introduction to the Forum on Women and Theatre, I would like to begin by exploring how and why women went to the theatre, what they expected of it, who they were and how they were represented. Since the 1980s considerable scholarship has been undertaken to uncover plays written by women and to analyse from various feminist perspectives the way women were represented on stage by male authors and by boy actors. This was path-breaking and essential work, but we also need to consider how plays in performance might not always align neatly with critical readings of dramatic texts, and that the performances themselves were very different in the Early Modern period than in our own respectful auditoria. Moreover, while theatre history often offers tantalising snapshots of female participation in court masques and drama, as well as accounts of attendance at publically performed plays, little is known of women’s vocal and physical activity during performances. The presence in the theatre of orange-women primarily interested in selling their wares, of female playgoers intent upon a variety of entertainments and of idiosyncratic characters like Mary Frith, the Roaring Girl, suggest that a more complex analysis of the way in which women negotiated their roles as mute viewers within a space dominated by men is necessary.
The attendance of orange-women at plays in London theatres is most commonly known from the story of Nell Gwynn, who became the mistress of Charles II, but her career was not commonly replicated by other working women in the theatre, particularly before the Restoration. In her essay ‘Gender at Work in the Cries of London,’ Natasha Korda excavates the ways in which these lower class women are portrayed in ballads, printed texts and plays. Alongside the orange-women, she identifies women selling, ‘tobacco, gingerbread, pippins, nuts and even cheap print,’ pointing out that,

The visibility and vocality of working women within the walls of the theatres would thus seem to have represented a significant performative aspect of the playgoer’s theatrical experience, an aspect that has hitherto been overlooked by theatre historians…what were the attitudes of the all-male playing companies towards this largely female, boisterous “side-show”?\(^2\)

Korda argues that the denigration of the street criers in Early Modern drama, such as Jonson’s satirical attack, served to legitimise the professional players as they defined themselves against itinerant forms of entertainment, from which they themselves had recently evolved. But, as Korda astutely notes, by inscribing the female vendors as a marginalised and illegitimate presence within the theatre, the male professionals simultaneously foregrounded their own commercial and transient origins. The construction of a gendered dialectic in which men are legitimate performers within an authorised commercial space and in which women provide an informal ‘side-show’ in an unlawful market cannot be sustained precisely because they occupy the same theatrical site. As the orange-women demonstrate, Early Modern theatres provided public exchange as well as performance. The working women’s presence complicates the representation of women on stage through their vocalisation of economic independence, which was linked in popular perception with sexual availability. Jonson’s city comedy indicates this destabilisation of patriarchal
discourse by mocking Morose’s complaints about the noise made by orange-women, while simultaneously satirising women through the supposedly ideal silence of Epicene.

In a misogynistic diatribe, heavily indebted to Juvenal’s Satire VI, Jonson presents a comprehensive catalogue of women’s faults, from the licentious behaviour of ‘fair’ and ‘foul,’ to the excessive demands of those who are ‘rich…fruitful…[and] learned.’ Intriguingly, Truewit begins this traditional querelle des femmes attack by linking women’s sexual behaviour with the theatre:

Alas, sir [Morose], do you ever think to find a chaste wife in these times? Now? When there are so many masques, plays, Puritan preachings, mad folks, and other strange sights to be seen daily, private and public.³

Subsequently, women’s craving for public entertainment is underscored by the play’s Collegiate Ladies, who demand that Morose puts on a masque, confirm that attendance at plays is associated with amorous dalliance, ‘kiss our hands all the playtime,’ and freely visit ‘Bedlam…china houses’ and the ‘church’ for their amusement.⁴ Jonson’s representation of how women participated in London’s varied spectacles suggests a vocal, independent and adventurous presence. Moreover, although the play’s final address to the audience indicates that the women watching the performance have been made ‘mute’ by the discovery that Epicene is a boy, Truewit concludes by asking all the ‘spectators’ (men and women alike) to stand, applaud and make a ‘noise.’⁵ Thus, in a particularly Jonsonian volte farce, Truewit shifts from a satire against women, to the unleashing gender misrule through a powerful avocation of pleasure that may, only tenuously, be linked to virtue.

The Collegiate Ladies describe how women actively seek pleasure at theatrical performances, but, although the play’s satire demands that their desires are interpreted as grotesque exaggerations, there is evidence that this behaviour might be an authentic account. There are a number of satirical texts that refer to
women attending the theatre for illicit sexual encounters, including: the ‘Cheapside
dame [who will]…invite us [gallants] home, We’ll thrust hard for it, but we’ll find her
room;’ Amanda, the reformed whore who goes ‘to some playhouse in the afternoon.
And for no other meaning or intent, But to get company to sup with soon; and ' the
‘unwholesome enticing harlots, that sit there merely to be taken up by prentices or
lawyers clerks.’” Perhaps the most comic of these accounts occurs in Henry
Peacham’s *The Art of Living in London* (1642) where he tells the tale of a
tradesman’s wife whose purse was stolen when she went to the theatre and her
subsequent explanation:

> Quoth her husband, ‘Where did you put it?’ ‘Under my petticoat,
between that and my smock.’ ‘What,’ quoth he, ‘did you feel nobody’s
hand there?’ ‘Yes,’ quoth she, ‘I felt one’s hand there; but I did not
think he had come for that.’

While these offer a comic portrayal, the commonality of such representations confer
an authenticity upon the way in which Early Modern women went to the theatre for a
variety of reasons, only one of which seems to have been to watch the play. Andrew
Gurr, in his invaluable analysis, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* (1987), provides
information about female spectators, including their station, from ladies to prostitutes,
and makes the important point that we need to be aware of the variable represented
by different theatres, periods and dramatists, while succeeding scholarship has
tended to concentrate exclusively upon female spectators and how they are
addressed in prologues and epilogues. The amorous encounters that occurred
alongside the orange-women and other female vendors selling their wares were,
however, not nearly as infamous as the presence of Mary Frith.

An entry in *The Consistory of London Correction Book* (1612) recounts how
Frith dressed and acted like a man, visiting, ‘alehowses Tavernes Tobacco shops &
also to play howses…[where] she there vppon the stage in the publique viewe of all
the people there presente in mans apparel & playd vppon her lute and sange a
Frith’s presence in the theatre is attested to by her inclusion in Thomas Middleton’s and Thomas Dekker’s play *The Roaring Girl* (1611) which claims to represent her life and at its close promises,

The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,
Shall on this stage give larger recompense.
Which mirth that you may share in, herself does woo you,
And craves this sign, your hands to beckon her to you.  

The epilogue assures the audience that Firth will present herself on stage, and elides the distinction between women and character through the processes of ‘mirth’ and the pleasure recorded by the audience as they applaud the performance. There is no castigation of Frith’s promised presence and, unlike Jonson’s satirical attack on the orange-women and the Collegiate Ladies, the play welcomes Frith’s interaction with the audience. Indeed, Middleton and Dekker imply that real Roaring Girl’s appearance acts as an inducement to theatre-goers, an argument that is underscored by a parallel usage of her character in Nathan Field’s *Amends For Ladies* (1618). As Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing comment in their edition of Mary Frith’s life, ‘it must have seemed that her notoriety would be good box office or good for the publisher’s receipts.’ Frith’s vocal presence on stage is further affirmed by the *London Correction Book*, which records her addressing the audience with immodest & lascivious speeches, informing them that, although she looked like a man, she would prove she was a woman. Mary Frith was an unusual and idiosyncratic character and it would be wrong to assume that her presence on stage, together with playing the lute, singing and making ‘lascivious’ speeches, was emulated, or even admired, by other women. Nevertheless, there are elements common to the orange-women, the amorous female spectators and Frith that suggest a distinct gender-specific discourse, which might have been illicit, but which ran parallel with the authorised entertainment being acted out on stage.
The first point of convergence is class; none of the women depicted is noble, some are middle class, most are poor. The itinerant sellers of oranges, apples and tobacco were forced into such labour because of the strict rules applied to retailers in Early Modern England. Although trading in London was not policed as stringently as in the provinces, regrating (purchasing food items in bulk and selling them on in smaller quantities) was perceived as threatening the profits of shop holders. A sign on London Bridge warned women, ‘Let no Regrateress pass London Bridge towards Suthwerk…to buy Bread, to carry it into the City of London to sell.’ The use of the feminine, ‘Regrateress,’ indicates that this occupation was considered to be one taken up mainly by women and it was one of the few ways that a poor woman could earn a living. The female spectators described are not always poor - the Collegiate Ladies and the tradesman’s wife, for example, belong to the bourgeoisie - but these women are often depicted as selling their company and/or sexual favours. Finally, Mary Frith, was not only a cross-dresser but also a thief, as a further name applied to her - Moll Cutpurse – attests. In this analysis of class a further commonality becomes apparent; the poor, the prostitutes and thieves are all on the margins of legitimate society and all are perceived as transgressing the law. Another element emerges through the concept of misdemeanour, in that all groups of women are alleged to be sexually transgressive: the orange-women were depicted as selling sexual favours as well as fruit; the female spectators, even if not selling their bodies, were clearly at the theatre with amorous intent; and Mary Frith through her dress, habits and ‘lascivious speech’ challenged moral codes. Finally, the most powerful link between these women is that they did not sit silently watching the play. It is important to recognise that Early Modern theatres would have been alive with women’s actions and voices - the cries of orange-women, the dalliances of female spectators and the songs of Mary Frith. Together these provided, as Natasha Korda indicates, a ‘female, boisterous “side-show”.’ Moreover, while these women might be perceived as challenging the legitimate all-male theatrical activities, dramatists like Jonson,
Middleton, Dekker and Fielding clearly recognised the compelling power of their voices and, tellingly linked them to applause, ‘box office’ and other female members of the audience.

There is still work to be undertaken on how Renaissance plays negotiated the fact that the women present during performances engaged with the experience of Early Modern theatre in a variety of ways - ways that, in turn, complicate how criticism interprets the roles of female characters on stage. The essays collected here, however, begin to shed new light on the elements that have been identified as linking the orange-women, female spectators and the roaring girl.

Nora Corrigan’s essay, ‘The Merry Tanner, the Mayor’s Feast and the King’s Mistress: Thomas Heywood’s 1 Edward IV and the ballad tradition,’ describes, in the main plot, the tale of a tanner, Hobs and his meeting with the King, and, in the subplot, the story of Jane Shore who is taken by the King to be his mistress. The account of Hobs was originally circulated in ballad form before being reworked by Heywood, but the Jane’s narrative was taken from the popular retelling in poetry and drama of her story in the late-sixteenth century. Corrigan points out that a ‘citizen’s wife turned royal paramour was an unlikely heroine in a culture that valued female chastity,’ and goes on to stress that Heywood differs from the earlier material by making Jane a chaste and loyal wife before the King seduces her. Indeed, within the play Jane is aware of her own ‘powerlessness and the dangers of disobeying the monarch,’ and rather than being vilified she is supported by her community and presented as a sympathetic character to the audience. As Corrigan concludes,

In Heywood’s plays, the commoners’ primary relationships are with other commoners, and these social networks are permanently disrupted by the king’s actions. By placing…Jane at the heart of a vital and supportive community, Heywood makes us acutely aware of what these characters – with whom Heywood’s original audience would have had much in common – stand to lose through their
The two key themes of class and sexual exploitation are centred upon the character of Jane in Heywood’s play and Corrigan’s telling analysis of the role of the ‘original audience’ in her construction and reception allies Shore with the female vendors and spectators who were certainly present during the play’s staging in the late sixteenth century.

The emphasis upon marginalised characters and sexual availability is echoed in Elizabeth Hodgson’s essay, ‘A Fine and Private Place: Chapman’s Theatrical Widow,’ in which she reads George Chapman’s play, *The Widow’s Tears* (ca.1605) through the perspective of conduct books for widows and popular widow-narratives. The play’s first plot focuses on Lysander, who pretends to be dead in order to test his wife’s faithfulness, while in the second plot the widowed countess, Eudora, is successfully wooed because her suitor realises that ‘her desires are far stronger than her grief.’ Lysander woos his ‘wife’ in the disguise of the soldier who has killed her husband and, predictably the ‘widow’ succumbs to his advances. Hodgson argues that this play offers a ‘persistent analogy between theatrical performativity and widows’ performatively private grief,’ concluding that the unknowability of the widows’ inner feelings acts as a metaphor for the play’s own ‘inscrutable’ meaning. This reading challenges traditional criticism of the play, which tends to read Chapman’s representation of lusty widows as misogynistic and reductive, but by drawing on the earlier ballad and conduct book traditions Hodgson is able to complicate interpretation through awareness of contemporary discourse. Like the Early Modern theatre, widows occupied a marginal position in which unknowability served both to protect and entertain.

Yvonne Bruce’s essay, ‘“That Which Marreth All”: Constancy and Gender in *The Virtuous Octavia*,’ deals with a very different form of theatre, choosing to focus on Samuel Brandon’s 1598 closet drama. Bruce investigates the character of Octavia, Anthony’s ‘long-suffering and long-virtuous wife’ in relation to Christian
Stoicism, pointing out that its tenets provided inadequate moral guidance for Early Modern women who were faced with ‘the messy fragilities of human nature.’ In addition to her careful analysis of the play’s ‘ironic reminder that the gulf between human passion and the ideals of divine reason remains unbridgeable,’ Bruce compares Octavia to the licentious Sylvia who ‘claim[s] the sexual freedom of a man’ and she quotes Sylvia’s speech, ‘I hate subjection and will nere be brought.’ The strident independence of Brandon’s character parallels that of Salome in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* (ca. 1603), in which the character claims ‘to show my sex the way to freedom’s door.’ While both Sylvia and Salome serve as dark contrasts to the heroines’ ideal virtue – both Octavia and Mariam are unquestionably virtuous – their vocal claim for independent subjectivity, particularly in a sexual context, demonstrates that such disputes could, and were, aired in security of the closet dramas. Unlike the public theatre, the restricted nature of any ‘audience’ allowed Cary, as a female dramatist, to deal with a range of sexual roles for women in her text. Women’s contribution to and involvement with closet drama has attracted considerable critical attention and Bruce’s essay is a valuable correlative to enquiries based on women writers.

What each essay demonstrates is that, in order to excavate the way in which women negotiated the theatre in Early Modern England, it is essential to appreciate the context of the ‘original audience,’ their cultural contexts, their understanding of the narratives’ traditions, and their social codes. The invaluable work undertaken by theatre historians on the material circumstances of production needs to be set against critical analyses of texts in order to uncover the complex negotiation between how women were represented on stage and how they presented themselves as playgoers. For us to appreciate fully the nuances of characters, from Jane Shore, the royal mistress, to Eudora, the widowed countess, it is important to remember that, while they were being acted on stage by boy-actors, the theatre itself was full of vocal
and active women, such as the orange-women, the amorous female spectators and, maybe, even a roaring girl.

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11 Todd and Spearing, *op.cit.*, xv-xvi.
14 See below pp.***
15 See below pp***
16 *Ibid.*, ***
17 *Ibid.*, pp.***
18 *Ibid.*, pp.***
19 Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, *op.cit.*, p.53.