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“Effeminate carriage”: Gendered Performance in Thomas Campion’s Lute Songs

The twenty-nine “books of ayres” or songbooks for lute and voice printed in London between 1597 and 1622 share a preoccupation with female performance. Thomas Campion’s ayres, in particular, come to fixate upon the power of women’s singing voices. Campion’s songs will wax nostalgic for a beneficent female monarch, for example, or idealize female aristocrats in intimate domestic spaces – responding to the isolation that male composers felt from royal spheres of patronage. Yet Campion’s books of ayres, which were specifically designed for a domestic performance milieu that included women, also enabled female performers to participate directly in the ayre movement. Women were increasingly likely to be trained as musicians by the time the songbooks were printed, the vocal range and lute tablature of the ayres is appropriate for amateur female singers and lutenists, and the “table book” format of the songbooks invites performance in an intimate household context. Dozens of ayres, particularly in Campion’s later songbooks, include female personae that respond to or critique literary conventions privileging male perspectives. The result is a notable opportunity for women to shape poetic and musical culture.