

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: OF MUSES AND MONSTROSITIES: ENGLISH  
TRAVESTIE PERFORMANCES OF THE  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY

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Performance Studies, 2018

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This dissertation serves as an introduction to the performance genre of travestie. Unlike the popular breeches form in which an actress plays a female character who cross-dresses as a man for a short duration of time but returns to her skirts by the end of a play, travestie performance is defined as an actress performing a male character on a public stage in male disguise for the entirety of a production. In this dissertation, I showcase how travestie questions the complex eighteenth-century English conceptions of normative gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation through performances of public undress that may have been the precursor to the modern burlesque genre. Through examining the case studies of Miss Margaret “Peg” Woffington, Mrs. Charlotte Charke née Cibber, and Mrs. Dorothy “Dora” Jordan, this dissertation analyzes the travestie genre through its connections to comedy, mythmaking, iconography, and the modern burlesque movement. I have chosen to utilize the spelling of travestie over the Italian and contemporary English spellings (travesti and travesty, respectfully) in

accordance with the accepted spellings of the term within the eighteenth-century London theatrical landscape.

I assert within this dissertation that the actresses who performed travestie purposefully chose this genre through their own theatrical awareness and business savvy. Emphasizing transhistorical perspectives and historiographical intervention, this dissertation reassesses and reinterprets contemporary views of these travestie actresses, using autobiography, biography, and narrative techniques to allow the long-gone voices of these actresses to speak for themselves. Muses for various artists and poets, the successful travestie actress lived within the liminal space between the fluidity of gender. Within their travestie performances, these actresses housed within their own bodies monstrous contradictions of gender that are explored in this dissertation through the interdisciplinary lenses of theatre historiography and gender studies.

OF MUSES AND MONSTROSITIES:  
ENGLISH TRAVESTIE PERFORMANCES  
OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctorate in Theatre and Performance Studies  
2018

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## DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad, Caitie, and Lyss: Proudfeet from the womb to the tomb.

To Laura, Noreen, and Esther: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

To Alex: Thanks for being my player two, for being my muse, and for reading more versions of this monster than anyone ever should have.

And to Morrigan: May you never give up on your passions. Mama loves you.

#fouryearsandababy

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## INTRODUCTION

The audience quiets briefly after a particularly humorous line by the lady ingenue on stage and the young woman hears her entrance cue. Taking a deep breath, she throws back her shoulders, shifts her center from her chest to just below her navel, and mindfully steps on stage, careful to remove the heavy swing from her hips. Free of her skirts, she now wears a sword belt and a tricorne hat. Placing one foot forward and bending deftly at the waist, she bows to the other actresses on stage and introduces herself as the gentleman they've been waiting for. The play continues as scripted while the young woman points and winks at her audience. They are in on the secret: the actress is performing in travestie and the other characters on stage believe her to be the man she says she is.

The actress performs the entire play, presenting herself as a man in mannerism as well as in costume. Her bared ankles, tied back curls, and tight-fitting pants give her a flexibility of motion that she has never experienced in her corsets and skirts. She wears her pants on stage much as she wears her pantaloons below her skirts on a daily basis. The breeches, borrowed from a fellow male castmate, show off and accentuate her form and physique. The young actress earns cheers from the audience; they are impressed by her versatility as an up-and-coming star but they are equally as excited by the visibility of her body in such a public space. Based on the positive reactions from the crowd, she knows that this travestie role will solidify her professional status and will more than likely lead to great financial gain for herself and for the theatre. Adding the gentleman caller to her growing repertoire, she exits the stage for the evening, confident that she made the right choice for her career.



This fictional actress is an imagined facsimile of the three case studies that this dissertation will explore in relation to the significance and nature of the eighteenth-century London performance genre I call travestie.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the popular breeches roles of the period where actresses would perform female characters who disguise themselves as men for the duration of a scene or two before returning to their skirts for the end of the play, travestie actresses were performing male roles written as men to be performed by men. These actresses would don the garb of their male counterparts and strut across the stage, emulating the swagger and gait of conventional masculine maleness for the entirety of the production.

Although contemporary scholarship tends to collapse travestie and breeches roles into one category of breeches performance, I assert that this is a disservice to the importance and significance of the travestie performance genre. Actresses who chose to perform in travestie did so purposefully. I claim that the travestie actress performed such roles in an attempt to gain professional legitimization through their performances of masculinity. Furthermore, these cross-dressed performances place the performer in a state of eighteenth-century undress for a woman; making travestie performance the precursor to modern burlesque. This dissertation is a historiographical intervention and reinterpretation of the gendered performances of travestie actresses on and off the eighteenth-century London public stage. Through the three case studies of Miss Margaret “Peg” Woffington (1710?-1760), Mrs. Charlotte Charke née Cibber (1713-1760), and Mrs. Dorothy “Dora” Jordan (1761-1816), I showcase the various ways in which travestie

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<sup>1</sup> I use the eighteenth-century English spelling of the word to coincide with the period in which I am working.

actresses used their performances in male disguise to gain professionalized status through their presentations of masculinity and through this state of undress.

In eighteenth-century London, women still wore the traditional corsets and skirts of the period with their breeches hidden safely beneath layers of fabric. When a travestie actress entered the stage in her breeches for the entirety of a performance, she was essentially putting herself in her undergarments on public display. This burlesque entertainment was done in the relative safety of the professional playhouse, giving the performance a level of social acceptability and launching the careers of these entrepreneurial actresses. Business women and performers, travestie actresses rode the line between muses and monsters; they were praised for their beauty in pants and their acting versatility but they were also shunned and antagonized by some members of the public (and sometimes by members of their own company) for their public displays in breeches.

To successfully perform a travestie role, actresses needed to be quick and lively in their comedy and comfortable in their revealing breeches. They were painted by their contemporaries as muses, influential and inspiring women who sparked the creativity of artists through their skills and physique. Through wearing men's clothes, these actresses highlighted their femininity. Pants on a woman were unnatural in most social circles of the period so the actresses who wore them were defined by their feminine shape beneath the breeches. Furthermore, by wearing the tight-fitting pants and vests of a male character, the actress's curves were put on display. Although this display of the female form was antithetical to traditional ideas of feminine decorum, it also placed the curves and lines of the body in view, inspiring many artists through their beauty and

flirtatiousness. Much as burlesque performers would later become popular for their winks to the audience, comedic timing, and sexualized teasing of the male gaze, travestie performers utilized many of the same metatheatrical tricks long before when performing masculine male characters on the public London stage.

But theatre was and still is a business. Some actors and actresses were jealous of the financial gains travestie actresses earned through their unconventional performances. Wary of their unconventional and subversive performances, travestie actresses were idolized almost as often as they were criticized. Wearing the breeches and donning masculinity was counter to conventional gender roles of the period; placing the travestie actress in direct opposition to the natural order of the sexes. I use the term monstrosity in this dissertation to describe this opposition as a way to critique the paradoxical paradigm that the travestie actress was living within. Monsters are unnatural creatures, they are frightening and exciting. They walk in our midst and haunt our dreams. Monsters are representations of our fears, of the unknown. Travestie actresses were walking with monsters when they donned their breeches on stage; they were unnatural, they were exciting, and they were frightening for anyone who still held fast to the traditional gendered beliefs of womanhood. When in her pants, the travestie actress existed in a liminal gendered space; her disguise highlighting both her masculinity and femininity simultaneously. The popularity of their travestie performances illuminated the complexity of gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation that were just beginning to be questioned and challenged in eighteenth-century London.

Travestie in the eighteenth-century was rarely called as such. Rather than name the gendered actions of actresses as travestie, newspapers and journals of the period

instead referred to their performances as “in men’s cloaths” or “in boy’s cloaths.”<sup>2</sup> In eighteenth and nineteenth century London, the terms travestie/travesti/travesty were often used interchangeably with burlesque and I use the eighteenth-century spelling of the term in this dissertation to keep the term connected to the historical moment in which these actresses were performing. Although examples of the conflation between travestie and burlesque are plentiful,<sup>3</sup> I turn here primarily to the early nineteenth century *Hamlet Travestie* as a main source. The piece, written by John Poole in 1811, calls itself a “Travestie in Three Acts with Burlesque Annotations,” connecting travestie and burlesque completely.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to the piece, Poole writes his intention behind choosing to name the play a travestie:

It may not be amiss to remark that, although oftentimes used indifferently, the terms burlesque and travestie are properly distinct: burlesque is more general in its application; travestie more particular: the former is levelled against blemishes

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<sup>2</sup> Instances of this can be found in *The Daily Courant*, *British Apollo*, *Original Weekly Journal*, *British Gazetteer*, *Daily Post*, *Daily Journal*, *Morning Herald*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Morning Post*, *Diary or Woodfall’s Register*, and the *Gazetteer*. Some specific examples: “Madame Simonet, who danced after the Opera, in men’s cloaths, displayed that grace of action, and elegance of figure, that at once surprised and delighted the audience” (“Arts and Entertainment” in *London Courant and Westminster Chronicle*. London: May 10, 1780.) and “The Epilogue spoken by Miss Santlow, in Boy’s Cloaths, who acted the part of the Eunuch” in *British Apollo* (“Arts & Entertainment” in *British Apollo*. London: Feb 17, 1710. Issue 103.)

<sup>3</sup> The below examples are just selections from a variety of newspapers and journals of the period that use the term in this way. In an article for *The Museum: Or, The Literary and Historical Register*, an unnamed author introduces a new letter mocking the previously published letter of Mr. Addison, “The following Travestie was written from Italy, in the height of this Mode, and was meant merely to ridicule it, without any the least Intention of lessening Mr. Addison, for whose Character the Author has a very great Regard” (*The Museum: Or, The Literary and Historical Register*. Vol. 1. Issue 5. London: R. Dodsley in Pall-Mall, 1746. 183.). Similarly, there was a common segment printed in *The Spirit of the Public* entitled “Moore’s Irish Melodies Travestie” which included short poems and verses meant to mock popular songs, poems, and people (“Moore’s Irish Melodies Travestie,” in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for the Year 1823: Being an Impartial Selection of the Most Exquisite Essays, Jeux D’Esprit, and Tales of Humour, Prose and Verse, That Have Appeared in the Morning Evening, and Sunday Newspapers with Explanatory Notes*. 2nd ed. London: Sherwood, Jones, And Co., 1825). In a critique of a recently produced Masque by Roger L’Estrange, an unnamed author claimed “Had the whole been intended as a burlesque, and the performers received instructions to travestie their various parts, they could not have more successfully reversed their respective attributes and characters” (*The Lady’s Magazine; or, Mirror of the Belles-Lettres, Fashions, Fine Arts, Music, Drama, etc, a new series*. Vol 7. London: S. Robinson, 1826. 121.).

<sup>4</sup> John Poole. *Hamlet Travestie: In Three Acts with Burlesque Annotations*. London: J. M. Richardson, 1811.

and defects, which its object is to expose and ridicule, and pleases by comparison; the latter is constructed upon the various excellencies of any particular work, and derives its effect solely from the force of contrast. Hence a travestie, instead of derogating the value or the reputation of its subject, may be considered as no inadequate test of its merit.<sup>5</sup>

Aligning Poole's definition of the term to the theatre would suggest that the travestie performances of actresses were not meant solely to mock or ridicule masculinity but were, instead, means of creating a significant new genre of performance that would eventually transition into the nineteenth century burlesque movement that still exists today. Creating a genealogy of the history of burlesque, travestie actresses showcased the complexities of gender and gender performance for the public. Crafting a professional image and a brand of the madonna and the muse while simultaneously piquing the sexualized, carnal interests of their audience, travestie and the actresses who performed it utilized the form with business savvy and clear entrepreneurial intention.

In the following chapters, I showcase how travestie actresses used this performance genre to craft a professional career in the theatrical world of eighteenth-century London that would eventually lead to the genre of burlesque performance. Using the kind of interdisciplinary scholarship exemplified by Marla Carlson's *Performing Bodies in Pain* as a guide, this dissertation utilizes different methodologies and approaches. Rather than claiming expertise in a single scholarly area, I place multiple fields into an interdisciplinary and transhistorical conversation. Carlson uses narrative strategies to supplement her historiographical and seemingly anachronistic comparisons between medieval performances of pain and contemporary performance studies scholarship on body knowledge and performativity. Similarly, this dissertation will

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<sup>5</sup> Poole, ix.

explore how narrative strategies can be employed to expand the history of gender and gendered performance on the eighteenth-century London public stage. Utilizing the biographies and autobiographies of three of the most famous travestie actresses from various parts of the eighteenth-century—Margaret “Peg” Woffington, Charlotte Charke née Cibber, and Dorothy “Dora” Jordan—this project emphasizes the ways in which travestie was presented on the eighteenth-century English stage, in daily life, and in iconographic representation as a means for career professionalization and a precursor to the burlesque movement of the nineteenth century. This dissertation examines the etymology of the term “travestie,” highlighting the aspects of performance that define a role as such and how the term has shifted in definition since its first iterations in the seventeenth century.

### *Historiographical Choices*

Although current literature on actresses of this period are relatively plentiful, a focus on their travestie roles are few and far between. While the travestie roles of many eighteenth-century actresses are mentioned in conjunction with their breeches roles by almost every scholar who explore their careers, little extra emphasis is placed on the gender dynamics of their male roles. This dissertation fills in those historical gaps by proposing a genealogy of English travestie performance and by analyzing how the gender dynamics involved in performing travestie are distinctly different from similar performances of breeches roles. I critique the genre of travestie by looking at what made it popular and I explore why it has been conflated with breeches performance in most historical accounts (despite success as its own form). Using biography and autobiography

as primary source, this dissertation examines how the narratives of these travestie actresses can help theatre historians and performance studies scholars to speculate the complexity of transhistorical gendered performance.

The scope of this dissertation focuses on the importance of travestie performance as a separate and distinct performance genre. Creating a genealogy of the genre beginning with the Italian opera and moving through to the burlesque traditions of the nineteenth century and beyond, this dissertation analyzes how travestie was utilized by actresses on the eighteenth-century London public stage for entrepreneurial success. Specifically, this dissertation asks and explores the following: Why were travestie performances such popular forms of London theatrical entertainment during the eighteenth-century? How did travestie performances change the way actresses were perceived by their public? How did actresses use their travestie performances to craft their own public image and professional careers? How can their performances of travestie illuminate the complicated matrix of gender roles, gender representation, and gender identity in London in the eighteenth-century? And how does a reexamination of gender performances of the eighteenth-century change the paradigm of the history of actresses?

In this dissertation, I use the careers, daily lives, and iconographic representations of three travestie actresses to explore the possible answers to these complex questions. Seen as a feminine and comical art form, travestie was considered more serious than burlesques but less professional than the dramatic performances of eighteenth-century stars like David Garrick and Sarah Siddons. Actresses like Miss Woffington, Mrs. Charke, and Mrs. Jordan were comedienues; while they could perform dramatic and tragic performances, their popularity came through their comedies. As will be

exemplified by Miss Woffington in Chapter Two, travestie actresses were charming and witty, curvaceous and flirtatious. Their careers were boosted through their comedic timing but their turn to travestie performance used the sexualization of the form to bring in even more audiences to witness them.

Travestie performance also presented to the eighteenth-century London public an ambiguous gendered mythos that brought with it a level of branding and image creation. Crafting their images as gender fluid actresses, travestie performers were masculinized by their breeches. This masculinity lent itself to a level of professionalization in the theatre; these comediennes were taken more seriously as versatile celebrity actresses through their travestie performances. They brought in the crowds with the promise of their shapely legs but the crowds stayed for their top-notch comedy. The ambiguity of their gender, the liminal space between masculine and feminine that they represented, gave gossip columns fuel for their writings as well as fed the imaginations of the eighteenth-century London public. Travestie actresses were sometimes misunderstood or, as in the case of Mrs. Charke which is explored in Chapter Three, were ultimately ostracized by polite and proper London society for their contradictory, monstrous, gendered performances.

Additionally, travestie was utilized by business-savvy actresses as a way to solidify their iconographic memory. Since it was unconventional for women of the period to wear the mantle of masculinity in such public ways, travestie actresses took advantage of their unique position through portraiture and sculpture. Muses for many artists, actresses like Mrs. Dora Jordan became the subject of painters, sculptors, and comic



artists, for better or for worse. Their physique was a model of inspiring perfection but their unnatural penchant for pants was also a source of iconographic mocking.

Although these actresses and their travestie performing contemporaries did their best to use travestie as a vehicle for professional legitimization through masculine and sexualized appeal, my three case studies were, ultimately, unsuccessful in this endeavor.<sup>6</sup> I claim their failure was due to three main issues (each of which is also, paradoxically, an example of how their travestie first flourished): the frivolity of the comic genre that travestie worked best within during the eighteenth-century, the liminal gendered mythos of the travestie performer that was often misunderstood by the eighteenth-century public, and the paradoxical thrill and perceived immorality of the travestie actress in eighteenth-century iconography.

### *Literature Review*

In this dissertation, I rely heavily on the work of previous scholars in the fields of biography and autobiography studies as well as theatre historians and gender theorists focused on the history and performances of actresses to support my historiographical claims. This dissertation is a primarily historiographical study, so I lean heavily on the work of historiographers like Diana Taylor, Mechele Leon, and especially Thomas Postlewait in the construction of my arguments.<sup>7</sup> Although they may not be mentioned

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<sup>6</sup> Although, actresses like Sarah Bernhardt and Charlotte Cushman were much more successful at making travestie performances of Shakespearean dramas acceptable to a nineteenth century public audience. I will speculate further on the reasons for this shift in the final chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Taylor's groundbreaking *The Archive and The Repertoire* was incredibly helpful in formulating my thoughts on the performative readings of bodies. Mechele Leon's book *Moliere, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife* also helped to shape my thoughts on the mythmaking moves of Mrs. Charke in Chapter Three.

directly in my work, their scholarship has a direct influence on the chapters to follow. Turning time and again to Postlewait's conversations of "history-as actuality" versus "history-as-event," this dissertation flows between primary narrative and historical evidence in the same way that memories flow between facts and fictions.<sup>8</sup> My focus in this dissertation is on reinterpreting the female voices of these periods and allowing their words to speak for them in a new way. I put myself into dialogue with these long-gone actresses, attempting to sift the facts from the fictions to better tell their stories while highlighting their connections to the travestie performance genre.

Furthermore, most of the historians and scholars I am conversing directly with are women, bringing to the forefront female perspectives from the eighteenth-century and forward. Although there are moments when I do rely on male scholars, I have purposefully attempted to use primarily female historians and historiographers within this work to prioritize female voices, mingling the thoughts, emotions, and challenges belonging to women of the eighteenth-century with those of the women living and working in the twenty-first century. Many of the complicated issues of gender dynamics that are encountered and laid bare by travestie performances can be aligned with modern conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and this dissertation is in dialogue with many contemporary scholars that are cited in the remainder of this introduction.

### **Biography and Autobiography**

In the field of biography and autobiography studies, this dissertation is heavily influenced by the works of Laura J. Rosenthal, Cheryl Wanko, Patricia Meyer Spacks,

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Postlewait. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 3.

and Dror Wahrman. Rosenthal's *Nightwalkers: Prostitute Narratives from the Eighteenth-century* has given me a solid base to begin my work with eighteenth-century biographies that were written for financial gain and for public consumption. Although the narratives in the book are written by biased men rather than by the infamous women they revolve around, Rosenthal outlines how the biographies and stories of their lives highlight how these prostitutes were perceived by some members of their public, despite the authorship and viewership of these biographies still being in question. In her influential introduction, Rosenthal outlines the narrative form of biography, explaining how it was meant to be consumed and how their narratives were framed, dramatized, and criticized. Furthermore, she breaks these narratives into two categories: reform narratives and libertine narratives. This breakdown can also be used to discuss the ways actresses, especially travestie actresses, of the same period were presented socially. Through the narratives of their lives (some true, some fictional), the prostitutes highlighted in Rosenthal's book become mythical urban legends through these written narratives, creating a kind of celebrity that I claim can be mirrored in the careers of travestie actresses of the eighteenth-century public stage.<sup>9</sup>

This dissertation is also in necessary conversation with Cheryl Wanko's 2003 book, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. In this book, Wanko begins the work that I continue with this dissertation. Particularly, her third chapter on the "Construction of Gender" in the century serves as a platform for my contribution to a much larger discussion of the complexities between

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these prostitutes were also actresses. A fair number of women attempted to make their fortunes on the stage first but then resorted to prostitution when they were unsuccessful actresses. In fact, the pay was often better in the brothel than on the boards for beginners.

gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the autobiographies of Lavinia Fenton and Charlotte Charke (two very opposite sides of the same coin), Wanko's chapter begins to analyze how actresses constructed their own gendered identities on and off stage, including in their own writings. The shortest chapter in the book, it explores two important actresses of the period and clocks in at only 19 pages. The only other chapter close to this short length consists of 20 pages focusing solely on Barton Booth. Wanko's focus on Charke and Fenton may be minimal and somewhat rushed, but it lays much of the groundwork for reading and understanding the purposeful crafting of a career image and brand that these women used. I continue her discussion of branding, image crafting, and mythmaking within this dissertation, adding specifically to her conversation on Mrs. Charlotte Charke.

I find that this dissertation has also been made stronger through the work of Patricia Meyer Spacks, specifically her books *Imagining a Self* and *Privacy*. In *Imagining A Self*, Spacks writes about the distinctions between fictions and facts that must be sorted through and accounted for when utilizing autobiography and novel as a source. Her chapter, "Female Identities of the Eighteenth-century," explores the complicated and complex relationships between women in fiction (art, novel, theatre) and women in fact (reality). Although her study is strictly comparative in nature (and, thus, is forced often into generalization), she highlights the performativity of gender, leaving necessary space for my own assertions regarding the differences between gender roles, identity, and representation in each case study. *Privacy* illuminates the differences between what she notes as "large and limited arenas," public and private domains that preclude very

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<sup>10</sup> Cheryl Wanko. *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2003. 71.

different performances of self and identity.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, she discerningly differentiates the private space as the domestic space and explores how the domestic space is still often a public space for women in the period. I utilize her conception of conflated public and private spaces for women consistently within this dissertation, analyzing the ways in which travestie actresses were always performing their gender roles, representations, and identities on and off the eighteenth-century London public stage.

Finally, I turn to Dror Wahrman's lengthy tome, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. Employing performance studies and ethnographic terminology, Wahrman uses the idea of "before the self" as the theoretical lynchpin of his work. Citing Clifford Geertz's work, Wahrman asserts that eighteenth-century ideas of selfhood were caught between the worlds of self-prescribed and publicly-prescribed identities. He claims that eighteenth-century conceptions of the self mirrored cultural identities of the period, calling the cultural configuration of the period the "*ancien regime of identity*."<sup>12</sup> Although most of his book explores the relevance of self identity in print culture, the tone of the book is engaging and highlights the expansive transition in the eighteenth-century relating to self-awareness and self-identification. Although Wahrman's assertions about theatre are often general and focused on the profession without notation of the separate gender experiences within the theatre, there are a few moments of note that locate the performativity of the public stage within his ideas of eighteenth-century selfhood that I find useful in the later chapters of this

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Dror Wahrman. *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 4.

dissertation, specifically when describing the perceived and realized identities of each travestie actress case study.

Perhaps the most relevant biographical sources for this dissertation are also the most difficult to use. For each case study, I rely heavily on the archival stories of possibly unreliable narrators. In the case of Miss Woffington, there are numerous biographies to which I return, although I turn most often to Augustin Daly's extensively researched biography of the actress. Daly was a collector with an obsession for an actress he could never meet. Miss Woffington died before Daly was even born; but his perceived connection to her is strong. Although he attempts to present his biography as objectively as possible, there are many moments in which his own biases come creeping through. He does his best to cite the sources he has collected through his infatuation with Miss Woffington, but unfortunately most of his sources were lost to time. The remaining biographies of Miss Woffington leave a bit to be scholastically desired. Both Charles Reade and Joseph Fitzgerald Molloy write of her life with more anecdote than fact and Janet Dunbar's much later biography of the actress is thoroughly researched but reads much more like a story than a history.

The case study of Charlotte Charke utilizes perhaps the least dependable storyteller. With only one actual biography written about her (Kathryn Shevelow's very recent story-driven *Charlotte: Being a True Account...*), I rely on a various collection of essays and manuscripts on Mrs. Charke and on her own autobiography.<sup>13</sup> A popular and

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<sup>13</sup> Those essays and manuscripts include *Introducing Charlotte Charke: Actress, Author, Enigma*, a collection of essays edited by Phillip Edward Baruth; *Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* with additional essays and commentary by Robert M Rehder; *Life-Writings by British Women, 1660-1815: An Anthology*, a collection of autobiographies and correspondences of British Women including Charlotte Charke; and *An Account of an Unaccountable Life: Performance in a Loop and Identity Ambivalence in Charlotte Charke's A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* by Pamela Paulson.

complex actress, Mrs. Charke's autobiography includes various anecdotes that have very little historical evidence to support or corroborate them. Her father, Colley Cibber, may well have seen to some of that erasure before his own death. Be that as it may, Mrs. Charke wrote what she called her autobiography in the style of a comical retelling of her life and various misadventures. Written in chapters and printed for financial gain at the height of Mrs. Charke's poverty, she wrote her autobiography for a very specific audience and for a very specific set of reasons. She needed the money, so her chapters needed to have as many delightful anecdotes as possible to keep her readers interested and buying. It may also have been an attempt to regain the love and support of her estranged father. No matter Charke's motives for the autobiography, I use her own retellings of her life as a guide through her travestie career on and off the stage.

Finally, I turn to the biographies of Mrs. Dora Jordan for the majority of my historical findings on the life of my final case study. Although James Boaden's collection of private correspondence barely counts as a traditional biography, it does include anecdotes of her life and facsimiles of her own writings that have been useful in understanding the mind and temperament of the actress.<sup>14</sup> Clare Jerrold wrote her biography, *The Story of Dorothy Jordan*, in 1914, focusing almost entirely on her stage career. Claire Tomalin, composing *Mrs. Jordan's Profession: The Actress and The Prince* in 1995, takes a more theatrical approach to her retelling of Mrs. Jordan's life. She primarily focuses on Mrs. Jordan's relationship with the Duke of Clarence, writing her own romantic narrative that may or may not have been counter to the truth of Mrs. Jordan's actual relationship. Neither biographer really delves into the iconographic

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<sup>14</sup> James Boaden. *The Life of Mrs. Jordan; Including Original Private Correspondence, and Numerous Anecdotes of Her Contemporaries*. London: Edward Bull, 1831.

representations of the actress, but the historical evidence they have gathered through Mrs. Jordan's personal letters to and from the Duke of Clarence supports many of my assertions.

### **Actresses of the London Stage**

This dissertation also utilizes the works of Kirsten Pullen, Lesley Ferris, Helen E. Brooks, Felicity Nussbaum and Kristina Straub. Each of these scholars writes about the historical views and lives of actresses: Pullen and Ferris look at women across centuries, while Brooks and Nussbaum focus on actresses and gender in the eighteenth-century specifically. Their monographs explore concepts of gender fluidity, gender normativity, and gender subversion in various ways; and I engage with many of their conversations throughout the dissertation. Perhaps most importantly, I place myself in direct conversation with Kristina Straub by complicating her thoughts on gender ambiguity and continuing her work on eighteenth-century performances of gender.

*Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*, written by Kirsten Pullen, begins with Mae West, moves through Betty Boutell, Charlotte Charke, and Margaret Leeson, and finishes with burlesque, breeches, and millennial prostitution and performance. Although the historical range of the book is immense, the theory and the chapter on Memoir and Masquerade is my focus. Pullen analyzes the social connections of prostitutes and actresses, constructing a history of status and performance. The third chapter, "Memoir and Masquerade: Charlotte Charke, Margaret Leeson, and the eighteenth-century performances of self," critiques Charke's autobiography, looking at it as both a literary apology, an erotic novelty, and a consumer good meant to garner



publicity and public funds for her ailing career.<sup>15</sup> Pullen's analysis of Charke's autobiography is detailed, but I do not agree with her claim that Charke wrote from the position of a "whore."<sup>16</sup> Rather than lay that title upon her, I claim Charke's positionality when writing her self-proclaimed autobiography is situated within the liminal space of the travestie actress: she is counter to normative gender roles and gender identity through the act of her authorship but she represents and highlights her femininity in her writing to balance her gendered social status. Pullen's subsequent chapter on breeches and burlesque is also of use in the conclusion of the dissertation, showcasing how the reactions to travestie roles shifts in the nineteenth century and leading me to my claim that travestie roles are the precursor to the burlesque performance genre.

Lesley Ferris's book, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*, is another source I engage with. In the second half of her book, Ferris outlines and prescribes the archetypal images of women in theatre prior to the twentieth century, critiquing the stereotypes of "the penitent whore, the speechless heroine, the willful woman, the golden girl, and women acting men."<sup>17</sup> Each archetype relies on certain visual cues to the public to be performed by the actress both on and off stage. Focusing in on the "Women Acting Men" section of her book, this dissertation follows the line of discourse created by Ferris, moving from her idea of "monstrous contradictions" to my own ideas of how actresses used travestie to craft their own mythologies through their complex presentations of themselves as both muses and monstrosities worth remembering.<sup>18</sup> Adding to her

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<sup>15</sup> Kristen Pullen. *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 55-92.

<sup>16</sup> Pullen, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Lesley Ferris. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. New York: New York University Press, 1989. 79-166.

<sup>18</sup> Ferris, 149.

genealogy of theatrical archetypes, I extend her argument into the world of travestie performance by locating each archetype within the cultural memory of the eighteenth-century on stage, in life, and in iconography of the period.

Turning to Helen E. Brooks, I utilize her *Actresses, Gender, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women* as another avenue of conversation. I am mostly in dialogue with her third and fourth chapters: “Playing Men: ‘Half the men in the house take me for one of their own sex’,” and “Playing Herself: ‘It was not as an actress but as herself, that she charmed every one’,” respectively.<sup>19</sup> These two chapters outline the ways in which women of the stage were always performing; how their public and private lives were always under constant scrutiny. In “Playing Men,” I look to her analysis of the social understandings of publicly cross-dressing women as both titillating and terrifying, where women become worthy of being named muses or monstrosities. And in “Playing Herself,” Brooks’s thoughts on social control and the construction of self and identity continue my earlier dialogues with Pullen.

Felicity Nussbaum’s *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* is another source of much conversation. Her book not only looks at celebrity, autobiography, and travestie, but also touches on the ways in which the actresses of this century were seen as public commodity to be consumed. Nussbaum questions the ways in which actresses of the period were understood by eighteenth-century society, asking why they were often treated differently than their male counterparts for performing similar roles. This dissertation takes her questions and focuses them on the travestie actress. How and why were these performers seen

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<sup>19</sup> Helene M. Brooks. *Actresses, Gender, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 63-116.

differently than their contemporaries who played their own genders only? What made these travestie actresses popular? Was it the performer herself? Or was it more about the novelty of seeing a woman's body on public display in male disguise? I join Nussbaum's conversation by bringing in the voices of the travestie actresses themselves as well as the thoughts and anecdotes written by their biographers.

Finally, I find that this dissertation is indebted to the previous work of Kristina Straub. *Body Guards*, edited by Straub and Julia Epstein, has given me articles and essays to look to in examining the creation, performance, and identifying of gender ambiguity throughout various points in history and in multiple locales. Most importantly, her book *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* begins the conversation that I continue in this dissertation. Straub analyzes the gaze of eighteenth-century audiences on both men and women of the London public stage, focusing the entire first half of the book on Colley Cibber before turning to a chapter on general actress femininity, one on George Anne Bellamy as "sentimental victim," and another on Charlotte Charke's "guilty pleasure" gender ambiguity.<sup>20</sup> Although her chapter on the construction of femininity as presented by the bodies of actresses on the stage is insightful and leaves much room for my own assertions to complicate her analyses, I challenge her interpretations of theatrical cross-dressing as guilty pleasure by noting them, instead, as a performance of gender identity that did not necessarily come from a place of guilty pleasure but, instead, from a place of identity exploration and sexual epiphany.

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<sup>20</sup> The chapter on Charke is printed in *Body Guards* as well in essay form.

Although there are many more publications that are influential to my work, I have found that the above texts all focus on the voice of the actress, a task I continue in this dissertation. Many of these books touch upon the gender transgressions of the travestie actress, but none of the authors take the dive into the complex contradictions of these performances. This dissertation explores the actress's life as never truly "off stage." Their choices on and off the literal London stage are survival skills used to create not only a brand, but also a kind of popular myth. Such mythmaking simultaneously was used to their entrepreneurial gain; using travestie performance as a paradoxical avenue of professionalization and sexualization, actresses crafted their careers with and through these gender-complex performances.

### *Methodology*

This dissertation makes an intervention in theatre historiography with the aim of reassessing, reinterpreting, and reclaiming the voices and performances of travestie actresses. The remainder of this introduction highlights the historiographical issues that relate to primary source material in terms of how others have dealt with autobiography and biography in historical reclamation projects, and how I use these pieces of evidence to craft my own narrative of travestie performance in eighteenth-century England. My main archive consists of autobiographies and biographies written by and about these actresses, and I give their voices and performances the spotlight. But, as Kristina Straub explores in her book on the eighteenth-century novelist Fanny Burney, women writers of the period were often understood during their time and by contemporary scholars as essentially liars until proven truthful:

Behind many brilliant feminist readings... lies the assumption that the woman writer is really two people, a masking presence acceptable to male-dominated culture and an inner self that is essentially female; this feminine duplicity, baldly posed as a characteristic of women writers and their texts, suggests the existence of an essential female quality that is ahistorical and culturally nonspecific because it reifies the female side of the writer's discourse (assuming that it exists) as being somehow separable from and more important than the patriarchal aspects of the text. The duplicity of Burney's fiction ...results instead in texts divided against themselves, embodying the ideological rifts implicit in female identity as it is created and creates itself in patriarchal culture.<sup>21</sup>

The disguise of womanhood and the complex narrative of female identity, especially in the eighteenth-century, is visualized within the written works of female authors.

Actresses who chose to write their own autobiographies were particularly subject to this criticism; writing about themselves and their many anecdotes on and off the public stage put their improprieties in writing, which resulted in a more complicated presentation of their gender.

The eighteenth-century theatre brought with it some of the first autobiographical accounts of the theatrical lives that graced the London stage. Specifically, this was also the first time women wrote about their own lives for public consumption (prior to this, all biographies of actresses had been penned by men). As a result, I use these primary materials as evidence to claim that this new method of performing self through narrative storytelling was a helpful tool for crafting the myths of these actresses. Such narratives were most often used for financial gain, to create moralistic legacies, and/or to garner public approbation for their time spent professionally treading the boards. In the following chapters, I aim to add one more motive to that list: to create and maintain a specific image of the self that relies heavily on the myths of travestie performers as

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<sup>21</sup> Kristina Straub. *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987. 6.

subversive and revolutionary figures on the theatrical stage. These actresses were smart business women and the theatre is a business. They utilized travestie performance to bring in an audience (through the sexualized nature of their undressed performance in men's clothes for the entirety of the show) and to gain their own celebrity status, thus solidifying their own financial independence.

The obvious flaw of these pieces of evidence lies in the flaws of the human mind, specifically in the memory and imagination of the writer. As mentioned earlier, the autobiographer is often the least reliable resource. Phillip Highfill calls this phenomenon of writing history through the imperfect lens of our minds “anecdotal evidence,” “eminently believable” but where “credibility is seldom certain.”<sup>22</sup> The autobiographer's mind filters through their memories, highlighting moments that they find important to the narrative of their lives (and sometimes creating false details that they recall differently from the truth).

The real trouble is when autobiographers chose to change, add, or omit certain details for their own purposes, snubbing enemies, praising friends, or even just praising themselves as better than they are. As Leigh Woods explains in his studies of the biographies of Edmund Kean, there was “a component in Kean's personality that drove the actor to alter, embroider, or invent details of his own early life for public consumption.”<sup>23</sup> These forms of writing can be understood much like the contemporary blog, Tumblr, or Twitter account, a flash of a public persona with some heightened

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<sup>22</sup> Phillip Highfill, Jr. “A Peep behind the Curtain: Mass Theatrical Biography,” in *In Search of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Biography*. George Winchester Stone Jr and Phillip Highfill Jr, eds. University of California Press, Los Angeles: 1976. 53-58.

<sup>23</sup> Leigh Woods. “Actors' Biography and Mythmaking: The Example of Edmund Kean,” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie eds. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City: 1989. 231.

moments, some splashes of truth, and a dash of creative bait for their audience. Their mind filters through their memories, highlighting moments that they find important to the narrative of their lives and sometimes creating false details that they recall differently from the truth. I examine these personal and anecdotal narratives by highlighting the emotions and motives behind the writing, sifting through the facts within the fictions, and by creating timelines to illustrate the temporal and financial incentives behind each piece of writing.

Writing an autobiography is much like performing a magic trick. The writing and reading of the piece is a performance in itself that requires a ready awareness of what the audience wants to see next. The author must present a pleasing amount of intrigue, keeping the audience captivated from the top of the trick through the dynamic closing sentence. It is a performance consisting of a public mask parading as a private event—no matter how large the spectatorship, each audience member must feel like the trick is specifically created and performed for them. A magician never tells their secrets and an autobiographer rarely presents all the hidden details of their life. Even the most thorough of biographers creates a specific image of the person in question, revealing and cloaking particulars as they see fit (or as best as they can perceive). Such complex narrative-driven accounts of what Postlewait calls “interpretive history” can make even the best historian’s head spin.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, biographical anecdotes are usually collected from diary entries, newspaper clippings, gossip columns, personal correspondences, or appointment books. And while some of these may hold more scholarly weight than others, each source

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<sup>24</sup> Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 3.

comes with their own pitfalls. What the biographer finds most important or interesting to their narrative might not be the most important to the overall story of the person's life.

Thomas Postlewait explains:

Theatre autobiographies are often notable more for their well-rehearsed anecdotes than for their accuracy on productions, people, and places. Typically, they are episodic, chatty, and, of course, self-aggrandizing. Their defining character, and often their charm, depends upon the self-serving performance of the autobiographer, a masquerade moved from stage to page. This characteristic trait of playing to the audience is hardly a fault... but it does present special problems for the theatre historian and biographer.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, locating the moments missing, added, or adapted in biographical and autobiographical accounts of persons can often tell a reader more about the writer (and the period they are writing within) than the actual history of subject.

So what is a biographer or historian to do when their subject willingly (or subconsciously) manufactures their own history to create a better story to tell their audience? How am I, as a theatre historian, to create a factual history of an actor or actress through their fictional accounts? My answer is simple: I can't. But I can cross reference multiple accounts to find and interpret the pieces that stayed the same.

Although this is a painstaking task and I invariably miss certain extraneous documents, in this dissertation I utilize autobiography alongside biographical counterparts, print clippings, correspondence, and any other materials available to discern the facts within the fictions. Even if those particulars turn out to be fictional, that still gives me a glimpse into what the person in question felt was most important to their story. Intentionality of the author is of great importance when working with archives like these. Every word must be taken with a grain of salt and skepticism is the key to finding the hidden truths

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Postlewait. "Autobiography and Theatre History" in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie eds. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City: 1989. 252.



among the narrative storytelling of a life in the theatre. Following this line of thinking, I critique the autobiographies written by these actresses for what they are: imaginative narrative recreations of their own crafted identities. Finally, I investigate the stories that are told consistently by biographers and autobiographers to better understand the social, political, and economic world that each autobiography was written within. Through this process, I not only locate these actresses and their writings within the larger annals of theatre historiography, but also create a better understanding of how memories in their various forms can be utilized for further research.

In the case of Kean, Woods finds that, no matter the circumstance, Kean's focus was less on the credibility of his history and more on the credibility of his stage persona—the heightened representation of himself that his audience adored.<sup>26</sup> Such historical “improvements” can be understood through their “excitement as storytellers,” a prominent trait in theatrical performers.<sup>27</sup> This trait, though damaging to the validity of these sources, can also be seen as a lens through which to peer into the minds and the worlds of the writers. Kean was an exhibitionist, a mythmaker, and one of the first referents for the archetype of the self-destructive actor of the nineteenth century. A performer at all times, there was no distinction between off stage and on. His private life was public; his marriage was the subject of gossip columns and his presence was larger than life. A showman through and through, Kean's biographies can be seen as a prototype for all performer biographies, “a metaphor for the actor which blurs and distorts the outlines of [their] own life.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I use the somewhat anachronistic example of Kean here to for the purpose of using of Leigh Woods' provocative article on actor autobiography.

<sup>27</sup> Woods, 238.

<sup>28</sup> Woods, 244.

For an example of the same issues that hits closer to home for the eighteenth-century, I need only look to the autobiography of Colley Cibber. I would argue that Cibber's autobiography lays the groundwork for Kean's autobiographical writings; highlighting the positive aspects of his life, theories, and career while sweeping under the metaphorical rug any mention of negative reviews or criticism. Writing in direct response to Alexander Pope's criticisms of his career, Colley Cibber's *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian, and Late Patentee of the Theatre-Royal With an Historical View of the Stage during his Own Time* is a satire of theatre criticism and a look into the mind of one of the eighteenth-century's most privileged theatrical artists. Virtually ignoring his family affairs, Cibber's apologia recalls meandering memories of his own youth and what drew him to the stage. Painting himself as the hero of the eighteenth-century stage, he begins his sixth chapter as follows:

Having given you the State of the Theatre, at my first Admission to it; I am now drawing towards the several Revolutions it suffer'd, in my own Time. But (as you find by the setting out of my History) that I always intended myself the Heroe of it, it may be necessary to let you know me, in my Obscurity, as well as in my higher Light, when I became one of the Theatrical Triumvirat.<sup>29</sup>

Cibber's autobiography paints the picture of a simple man with a talent for the London stage that would eventually raise himself to great esteem.

Cibber's writing claims his own importance and capacity for performing certain characters to excessive acclaim, leaving out his tendency to create many of his plays through cobbling together borrowed plots and characters from previous works by other playwrights. As Pope wrote in his *Dunciad*, Cibber's "patchwork plays" were pieced

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<sup>29</sup> Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian, and Late Patentee of the Theatre-Royal with an Historical View of the Stage during his Own Time. The Third Edition*. London: R.Dodsley in Pall-Mall, 1750. 147.

together from “crucified Molière” and “hapless Shakespeare;” such comments were the impetus for Cibber’s apologia.<sup>30</sup> Within the 448-page manuscript of his life and career, he admits only once to deriving his stories from another playwright: borrowing Molière’s title character from *Tartuffe* for his propaganda play, *The Nonjuror*.<sup>31</sup> Yet, theatre and literature historians beg to differ with Cibber’s autobiographical claims to originality. *The Double Gallant* was taken from two William Burnaby plays and Susanna Centlivre’s *Love at a Venture*.<sup>32</sup> *The Comical Lovers* was based on Fletcher’s *Wit at Several Weapons* and his hit *The Provoked Husband* was crafted from an unfinished piece by John Vanbrugh.<sup>33</sup> And giving truth to Pope’s accusations, *The Nonjuror* and *The Refusal* were adaptations of Moliere plays and the last play written by Cibber, *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John*, was a bastardization of Shakespeare’s *King John*.<sup>34</sup>

Much like the biased commentary of Alexander Pope and the purposeful omissions of Colley Cibber, evidence presented within an autobiography must be accepted and understood as tampered evidence. It can still lead to the ultimate finding, but it might take a few more steps than originally anticipated. Personal feelings about the author and their narrative storytelling cannot be left to cloud the better judgment of the material as archival evidence. Some of the best anecdotes may be false, placing even more “story” into the larger “history” of the actress and the period. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that these autobiographies are written with a purpose for a specific

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*. New York: Signet Classic, 2003. 214.

<sup>31</sup> Cibber, 427.

<sup>32</sup> L. R. N. Ashley. *Colley Cibber*. New York: 1965. 60, and R. H. Barker. *Mr. Cibber of Drury Lane*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Ashley, 64, Barker, 128, and Maureen Sullivan. *Colley Cibber: Three Sentimental Comedies*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973. 323.

<sup>34</sup> Ashley, 65-69, Barker, 106-107, and Sullivan 323.

audience. Common information known to the public already may be omitted or amplified for the sake of a sale.

Autobiographies and biographies of actresses create an even more complex set of signifiers that need to be untangled and confronted. “Throughout history,” claims Postlewait, “women’s lives, under varying conditions of patriarchy, have developed differently from men’s in psychological, social, vocational, and biological terms.”<sup>35</sup> Women were denied certain rights, required to fit into specific gender molds, and were expected to perform and conform to societal standards without question. For a woman to take to the stage professionally was already an act of moral deviation, making their personal lives even more intriguing to the general public. As Kristina Straub makes clear, “by becoming a ‘professional’ dependent in at least some part on public opinion, the actress was a public ‘personality,’ at odds with the domestic and private.”<sup>36</sup> Such contradictions left the actress outside of traditional ideological boundaries. “As women whose profession is undeniably public,” Straub explains that “actresses resisted the assumption that feminine sexuality was the private (and passive) opposite of masculinity.”<sup>37</sup> By performing professionally, actresses were proving that they did not require a man or masculine authority over them to be financially successful. And by performing male characters on stage in travestie performances, these actresses were furthering the proof that women could and would do anything that their masculine counterparts were capable of.

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<sup>35</sup> Postlewait, “Autobiography,” 260.

<sup>36</sup> Kristina Straub. *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. 89.

<sup>37</sup> Straub, *Sexual Suspects*, 89.

Furthermore, by taking on various characters and performing love scenes with men who were not related to them, actresses showcased the ability for women to be friendly with men who were not their husbands. Travestie actresses were often subject to gossip column claims of infidelity, prostitution, and mistresshood, but their names in the press (for better or for worse) only served to create more buzz around their careers (and more tickets sold at their performances). Romantic relationships on stage could (and sometimes did) affect the personal lives of these actresses; James Boaden writes of Dora Jordan in the early nineteenth century that “there was an ambiguity in her situation,” hinting at her various illicit affairs while still attempting to keep her reputation clean.<sup>38</sup> And, as the century progressed, it became more urgent for actresses like Dora Jordan to present themselves and their profession as respectable. Denis Diderot cautioned an unnamed actress friend to “remember that a woman only earns the right to free herself from the limits public opinion assigns to her sex through outstanding talents and through noteworthy qualities of heart and mind. One needs a thousand real virtues to offset an imagined vice.”<sup>39</sup> The connections between the stage and the brothel were never far from the public mind, and actresses who hoped to keep their good name and a strong reputation were constantly forced to over-perform certain roles and virtues to successfully survive professionally.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> James Boaden. *The Life of Mrs. Jordan; Including Original Private Correspondence, and Numerous Anecdotes of Her Contemporaries*. London: Edward Bull, 1831. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Melchior Freiherr von Grimm, Denis Diderot, Jacques-Henri Meister, and Jules Antoine Taschereau, A. Chaudé. *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot*. Vol. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1830. 100-105.

<sup>40</sup> Kristina Straub comments on this phenomenon in her book, *Sexual Suspects* (89-108). Kirsten Pullen uses examples from the life of Betty Boutell to illustrate this point in her book *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society* (22-54). Felicity Nussbaum also touches on this in her chapter “The Actress and Performative Property” Catherine Clive” in her 2010 book *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*.

The separation of public and private life was nearly impossible to attain for an actress; the gossip columns were vicious and the theatre world was small. To write about their lives was a veritable Damocles' Sword, offering hope for redemption while precariously remaining sharp and waiting to fall. Actresses were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. Their lives were under constant scrutiny and they were forced to create and present these heightened versions of themselves at all times. When the life of an actress was published prior to the eighteenth-century, their stories were most consistently told by men who often highlighted their personal affairs as the narrative hook, rather than their successful careers or entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>41</sup> These stories, which lack distinction between fact and fiction, were financially lucrative for their authors, but the women they were based upon rarely received any compensation for the sensationalized stories of their lives. Although this was also the case for many men on the stage, actresses rarely had a hand in the construction of their biographies (unlike their male counterparts, Garrick being a prime example). The biography had long been a boon and a bane for stage actresses. But the autobiography, on the other hand, was a tool for actresses to take back ownership of their own memories as commodities and legacies for public consumption and memorialization. This new method of performing the self through narrative storytelling allowed actresses the space to use their written memories for financial gain, to create moralistic legacies, and/or to garner public approbation for their time spent professionally treading the boards.

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<sup>41</sup> Postlewait, "Autobiography," 265: "The life of an actress, as told by men, becomes a series of sexual anecdotes; who cares if the stories are based on truth? No wonder, then, that actresses as autobiographers have attempted to fight against this malicious commentary, which historians are sure to carry forward."

*The Complexities of Gender and Gendered Terminology*

The eighteenth-century audience preoccupation with the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic identity bordered on obsession and hinged on the connections between the perceived off stage and on-stage personas of the performer. Again, I join Kristina Straub, Julia Epstein, Patricia Meyers Sacks, and many others in claiming that actresses were especially susceptible to moralistic attacks based on their theatrical roles and the performances of their gender roles on and off stage. Being a public performer did not fit the socially prescribed gender roles assigned to feminine women of the period. While gender identities and gender representations were much more fluid in the eighteenth-century for men and women, gender roles continued to be fairly strict for women. Straub explains,

...the actress figures discursively as the site of an excessive sexuality that must be—but never fully is—contained or repressed. As masculine dominance comes to depend more and more on a femininity defined as masculinity’s opposite, the actresses’ inherent challenge to the gendered, opposing spheres of public and private becomes increasingly the object of rhetorical containment and even erasure.<sup>42</sup>

Women who performed masculinity housed within their bodies monstrous, unnatural contradictions. Yes, there were extraordinary women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Caroline Herschel, and Emilie du Chatelet who were making names for themselves outside the traditional boundaries of gender.<sup>43</sup> But these women were the exception, not the rule.

And although it was acceptable for men to perform femininity, as is seen in examples of

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<sup>42</sup> Straub, *Sexual Suspects*. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an English writer, philosopher, and women’s rights activist. She is best known for writing *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792) in which she argues that women only appear to be inferior to men due to their lack of access to proper education. Caroline Herschel (1750-1848) was a German astronomer who discovered several comets in a career field that was traditionally only for men. Emilie du Châtelet (1706-1749) was a French philosopher, mathematician, physicist, and author who translated Isaac Newton’s book *Principia* containing the basic laws of physics.

dandies and fops of the period, it was unacceptable for respectable women to be masculine. As seen in a letter to his daughter, eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson writes in 1741,

I would have you remember, my dear, that as sure as anything intrepid, free, and in a prudent degree bold, becomes a man, so whatever is soft, tender, and modest, renders your sex amiable. In this one instance we do not prefer our own likeness; and the less you resemble us the more you are sure to charm...<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, poet William Hayley writes in his *The Triumphs of Temper*, that “Innocence and Ease” and “a wish to please” are the virtues of a woman—virtues that are difficult to come by if that woman’s wish is to also be a professional artist.<sup>45</sup> Even Rousseau wrote of a proper woman’s duties in his popular treatise, *Émile*. In perhaps my favorite line of the piece, he proclaims

A woman of wit is the scourge of her husband, her children, her friends, her servants, of everybody. In the sublime elevation of her fine genius she disdains all the duties of woman, and always begins by making a man of herself... Away from the home she is always the subject of ridicule, and is very justly criticized, as one never fails of being the moment she leaves her proper station and enters one for which she is not adapted. All this pretense is unworthy of an honorable woman. Were she the possessor of real talents, her pretension would abase them.<sup>46</sup>

Women were often relegated to one of two categories: muses or monsters. Those who chose to take on professions and leave the duties of the home were monstrous women. Those who remained within the boundaries of their gender were muses. Though many women of the eighteenth-century were breaking these boundaries and making positive names for themselves, they were working against the grain of social normalcy. Women

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<sup>44</sup> Noted in Whitney Chadwick’s *Women, Art, and Society*. London: Thames & Hudson. 1997. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Noted in Desmond Shaw-Taylor. *The Georgians: Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and Society*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1990.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Émile: Or, Treatise on Education*. William H. Payne, trans. New York: Appleton and Company, 1909. 303.



who performed masculinity were outsiders. And the travestie actresses of the eighteenth-century did more than perform masculinity, they wore the clothes, walked the walk, and talked the talk of men in public places for all to see.

As I claim throughout this dissertation, eighteenth-century women played with their gender identities and representations of femininity to flirt with the edges of traditional gender roles. In their 1880 book, *The Woman of the Eighteenth-century*, Jules and Edmond de Goncourt claim:

Woman in the eighteenth-century is the principle that governs, the reason that directs, the voice that commands... She gives the orders at court, she is mistress of the home. She holds the revolutions of alliances and political systems, peace and war, the literature, the arts and the fashions of the eighteenth-century, as well as its destinies in the folds of her gown.<sup>47</sup>

Women of the eighteenth-century performed within the realms of traditional gender roles, but they were beginning to challenge these roles by pushing back against them in subtle ways. Girls were still taught embroidery and music rather than more generally academic subjects, but women like Charlotte Charke urged their parents to allow them to learn more masculine subjects like riding and shooting.<sup>48</sup> Young women were still expected to marry up in class and, once this was achieved, their profession was to manage the home (a tedious and time-consuming occupation in itself).<sup>49</sup> Unmarried or widowed women were still considered spinsters; working as domestic servants, tailors, washers, and the like to support themselves and their families as necessary. The mothers of both Peg

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<sup>47</sup> Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt. *The Woman of the Eighteenth-century: Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 243.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Chadwick. "The Most Dangerous Talent': Riddles as Feminine Pastime" in *Women, Popular Culture, and the Eighteenth-century*. Tiffany Potter ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 185-201.

<sup>49</sup> Hyde, Melissa and Jennifer Milam. Eds. *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 38.

Woffington and Dora Jordan fit into this category of women on the margins of society, washing laundry and selling wares to support their fatherless children.

Women were allowed to own property in the eighteenth-century, but only under specific circumstances. They were not given the right to vote nor to divorce. Divorce was a costly act that had to be approved by Parliament. Men could file for divorce if they could prove their wife's infidelity. For a woman to file against her husband, she had to prove his infidelity as well as other acts of "life-threatening cruelty" (hence the rule of thumb: a man could beat a woman with anything less than the width of his thumb without consequence).<sup>50</sup> The rights of women and divorce in the eighteenth-century are exhaustively archived on the UK Parliament's official website. Although women were slowly beginning to present fluid gender identities and representations, feminine gender roles in the eighteenth-century were still just beginning to shift and their reverberations wouldn't be felt legally or politically until the nineteenth century.

To purposefully live outside the sanctions of socially prescribed gender roles required a narrative: a reason known to and approved by the public. Actresses began to write their own narratives, complete with character styling, scene setting, and storytelling. Rather than publicly admit to being raped at the age of nineteen by the married theatre manager Richard Daly, Dora Jordan crafted the persona of a young widow forced to care for her baby daughter alone.<sup>51</sup> The novel had become a new form of public entertainment in the eighteenth-century and autobiographical techniques

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<sup>50</sup> "Obtaining a Divorce." UK Parliament Online. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/divorce/> (accessed April 3, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> It was more accepted to be a widow than a mistress with an illegitimate child—especially since the father was also her manager and employer at the time.

developed alongside them. Actresses used these techniques to their advantage, crafting their images and autobiographies to best suit their own needs and desires.

I would be remiss to ignore my own personal biases within this methodology as well. As a female, cis-gendered historiographer attempting to reinterpret the performances of historical actresses, I must remember to make my own voice known and heard. After spending the last year with the actresses in my case studies, they have become like old friends. I am connected to these women in more than word; they are representations of the limits placed on women in the eighteenth-century that continue to reverberate now. I fight to make my own voice heard in a patriarchal system every day. My agency is assumed and taken from me when I am deemed a threat to the structure of the institutions I live and work within.

To me, these actresses were theatrical entrepreneurs, savvy and sexy. Wearing pants on stage and in their daily lives to cross gender boundaries that were only beginning to be recognized, travestie actresses used their physical bodies and the assumed limitations of femininity to gain access to power and agency that was not normally offered to them. They manipulated the system to their advantage; and I find that inspiring. My own bias towards the agency of these actresses may come through in my writing and, I hope, that that does not lessen the effectiveness of my arguments. I have had many a conversation with these women in my own head, attempting to understand their motives and agendas. And, through these conversations, I recall, reinterpret, and reassess their groundbreaking travestie performances as influential challenges to the professionalization of actresses and to the creation of the popular theatrical form of burlesque.

### *Chapter Breakdown*

This dissertation is split into four main chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter creates a historical etymology of the term itself. Moving through the castrati performances of the Italian Opera to the breeches roles of the early restoration theatre, the opening chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the dissertation. I also use this space to discuss the social, political, and historical effects of theatre on the eighteenth-century English stage, specifically with regard to presentations of female actresses in public spaces. Connecting their images on stage with their public images off stage, this chapter begins to question the unspoken gendered connections between travestie performances and the politics of power in relation to social and gender hierarchies.

Chapter Two, “Comic and Tragic Travestie,” begins the case study chapters with a focus on the actress Margaret “Peg” Woffington and the use of travestie performance specifically upon the public English stage. Utilizing her comic and tragic travestie performances, this chapter explores Miss Woffington’s successes and failures to better critique the requirements of successful travestie performance. I also look to the gendered expectations of the female body in travestie on the stage in a comedy versus in a tragedy. Examining audience and critic responses to these performances, I use the life and career of Miss Woffington to explore my claim that travestie was most successful in eighteenth-century London when performed as comedy. Finally, I use Miss Woffington’s trajectory as a travestie actress to explore the ways in which the metatheatricity of travestie is directly related to the genre of burlesque performance.

Chapter Three, “Travestie and Mythmaking,” turns to the most infamous of the eighteenth-century travestie actresses: Mrs. Charlotte Charke. Through my exploration of her life, her travestie performances on stage, and her travestie performance in her daily life as both gender subversion and familial mockery, I claim in this chapter that travestie was a tool for mythmaking in a period where actresses were often beloved and then quickly forgotten by their fickle audiences. Mrs. Charke used her performances of her father and brother as well as her offstage persona of Mr. Brown to craft a mythical image of herself that would continue to stay in the minds of her audience. Creating her own companies, proliferating possibly apocryphal anecdotes, and writing her own life for public consumption, Mrs. Charke used the public appeal and misunderstandings of her travestie performances and the autobiographical narrative form in entrepreneurial ways to make her legend stand the tests of time.

Chapter Four, “Displaying and Displacing the Female Body,” closes out the case studies of the dissertation with a focus on the iconography of Mrs. Dora Jordan. In this chapter I analyze paintings, cartoons, engravings, and statuary of Mrs. Jordan to evaluate how she was seen at various points in her theatrical career. Moving from comic muse to the monstrous travestie actress and mistress of the Duke of Clarence, Mrs. Jordan’s audience reception was a rollercoaster from start to finish. By looking at her various representations in art, this chapter discusses how travestie performance may have been perceived visually by her audience and by the artists who found her to be such a worthy subject. Furthermore, this chapter aligns Mrs. Jordan’s business savvy and the professionalization of her career pre, during, and post her relationship with the Duke of Clarence.

The final chapter consists of conclusions to the dissertation, with an exploration of the subsequent history of travestie performance as it relates to the beginning of the modern burlesque tradition. Reinvigorating conversations surrounding burlesque origins, the epilogue examines the entrepreneurial and sexualized spirits of the travestie actress that paved the way for future burlesque artists.

CHAPTER ONE  
TRAVESTIE: AN ORIGIN STORY

First entering into the language between 1655 and 1665, the term travestie derives from the French verb *travestir* meaning “to disguise,” and the slightly more complicated Italian verb *travestire*. A combination of the verb *vestire* (“to clothe”), and the prefix *trans* (meaning “across,” “beyond,” “through,” and “changing thoroughly”), the Italian *travestire* more acutely expresses how travestie relies heavily on the use of clothing across, beyond, or through gender to thoroughly change one’s representation of self.<sup>1</sup> The term is first used in English in 1662 by William Davenant. In his 1662 stage play/dramatic anthology *The play-house to be let*, he makes passing comment about the French and Italian Burlesque and Travesti traditions.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, the term can be seen in connection with Virgil: Charles Cotton’s book *Scarronides: or, Virgile Travestie*.<sup>3</sup> The connection between travestie and Virgil’s literary work continues in 1672 with John Phillips’s piece *Maronides, or Virgil travestie: being a new paraphrase upon the fifth book of Virgils Aeneids in burlesque verse*. Connecting the term to the use of theatrical costume, the term travestie appears in 1732 in Charles Wogan’s *Letters to Swift*.<sup>4</sup> In this letter, Wogan proclaims “My design was to have travelled... incognito... But all my art and travestie was vain.”

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<sup>1</sup> "travestie, adj. and n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/205300?rskey=69C9Y2&result=1> (accessed July 13, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> William Davenant. *Dramatic Works of Sir William D’Avenant: The Playhouse to be let*. London: Patterson, 1873.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Cotton Esq. *Scarronides: Or, Virgil Travestie. A Mock-Poem on the First and Fourth Books of Virgil’s Aenis, in English Burlesque*. 14th ed. London: J. Galton, 1765?

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wogan “Let. to Swift 27 Feb.” in *The Works*. Jonathan Swift and Walter Scott. Edinburgh, 1814.

But perhaps most influential to travestie's theatrical connections is the Italian translation of the word; partially for its direct connection to the Italian operatic stage, but also for its connection with the sticky Latinate prefix *trans*. Literally, the term can be translated to mean "across clothed," "clothing beyond," "clothing through/ through clothing," "transversely clothed," and "changing thoroughly through clothing."<sup>5</sup> The etymology of travestie can imply a piece of clothing that not only disguises the body from how it is naturally perceived (as the French translation suggests), but it can also mean a piece clothing that changes the body in a more than visual way. When connected to visual representations of the sexualized body, *trans* implies (in the twenty-first century) a disconnect between the biological sex of the body and the gender identity of the individual. There is a biological appearance that does not match the deeper internal identity. Theatrically speaking, the character is visually presented as male while the person inside the costume is not. This dissonance carries with it subversive potential, complicating ideas of gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation in public spaces.

Travestie, I propose, can and should be understood as more than just a mere disguise. Comparatively, breeches roles of the eighteenth-century fall more into the category of disguise. In these roles, female characters (played by actresses) theatrically disguise themselves as men for various plot purposes; but they remove their disguise by the end of the play, returning to their skirts and rejoining their biological female sex with their visible gender representation and identity. Travestie does not show the addition or removal of the disguise. Instead, the actress becomes the male character for the duration

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<sup>5</sup> "travestie, adj. and n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/205300?rskey=69C9Y2&result=1> (accessed July 13, 2017).



of the production, donning the disguise for much more than a momentary gender charade. The term's etymological connections with *trans*, a volatile prefix in twenty-first century scholarship, implies a more complex level of masking on and off the stage. Travestie should not be diminished to solely putting on a costume for box office appeal. *Trans* indicates that this costuming must be understood as something deeper and more consequential than applying makeup and donning pants. The connotations of the etymology ask that viewers of travestie suspend their disbelief in the costume, taking "disguise" a step further into the realms of masquerade, camouflage, cover, and façade. Sometimes used for pleasure, sometimes for survival, travestie connects the realities of clothing politics with the social and personal realities of gender construction. In a period when the normative understandings of sex and gender were generally accepted and rarely questioned, such gendered disguise held within it subversive potential.

Clothing was, and still is, connected to a very complex web of psycho-social implications and social, economic, and political connotations. The clothing a person wore in public spaces has been used to determine their social, economic, political, and personal identity for centuries. Social and economic statuses were closely tied to the burgeoning separation between the upper and lower classes, and these differences could be made easily visible through fashion. While fashion and theatre have always been tied together, the connections between high-fashion and the theatre of the eighteenth-century is important to note. Actors and actresses upon the prominent public stages were often dressed in the latest styles (or as close to it as they could afford considering the price of such extravagancies). Affluent patrons of the arts would often gift their secondhand clothing to their favorite playhouses, hoping to see their costly garments worn by their

favorite actors and actresses in the season's fare. Beginning in the Restoration theatres, audience members could pay a slightly higher ticket price to sit upon the actual stage itself during a performance, mainly for the social clout of being seen in their designer attire at the season's trendiest plays. This practice was still exercised into the mid-eighteenth-century, allowing audience members of the London theatres to see and be seen. David Garrick would put an end to stage spectators in 1763.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to travestie performances, the actresses who portrayed such roles were almost always garmented in the borrowed clothes of their male peers (often with minor adjustments made to fit their more curvaceous forms). The wearing of pantaloons beneath skirts was commonplace for many women of the period and I claim that to wear breeches (especially if they were borrowed from their unmarried peers) on the public stage was more reminiscent in the period of a state of undress rather than cross-dress. Foremost, travestie actresses bared all in their breeches; their trim ankles were visible at all times and their physique, normally hidden beneath layers of skirts, was highlighted and accentuated by the fit of their trousers. Athletic thighs and curvaceous derrieres were on public display for the eighteenth-century audience in a way that was improper for polite women. Furthermore, many travestie actresses first had to borrow their breeches costumes from their male contemporaries. While these are still pieces of a costume, to wear the breeches that belonged to and were most often worn by a man who was not her husband or relation could be equally perceived as scandalous and inappropriate. Once travestie actresses were successful in this kind of role, many began to collect their own

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<sup>6</sup> A.M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History: Twenty-five centuries of stage history in more than 300 basic documents and other primary material*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1952. 377.

masculine garb to call their own, a social faux pas for proper society and a boon for gossip columns and celebrity stardom.

But before travestie could ever grace the London stage in male attire, the stage had to be properly prepared. The first appearances of travestie as a term directly correlate with cross-dressed performances of young female singers performing male roles on the Italian operatic stage.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the travestie performances of the London stage (which would gain popularity soon after the *travesti* acts of Italy), these cross-gendered performances on the Italian stage began more out of necessity than personal desire. Unlike Miss Woffington (whose choice to perform travestie roles made her famous), the singers of the Italian opera who began the practice of travestie on a public stage sang male roles out of musical necessity.

#### *From Castrati to Travestie*

In operas prior to the eighteenth-century, it became popular for the lead male roles to be composed in the soprano, mezzo-soprano, or contralto range. These higher-pitched tones were considered more pleasing to the ear, even verging on the otherworldly and the ethereal. To hear a soaring voice was likened to hearing the voice of an angel, connecting the church hymns of popular soprano boys' choirs to the Italian operatic stage. Castrato singers (men who were castrated before the onset of puberty to restrict the growth of the larynx, allowing them to keep their higher-pitched voices) were ideal performers for the *en vogue* trend of composing operas with soprano-ranged male characters.

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<sup>7</sup> "travestie, adj. and n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/205300?rskey=69C9Y2&result=1> (accessed July 13, 2017).

While much has been written about opera and castrati performance, there is only one historian who has attempted to connect the quality of a voice with gender stereotypes in a full-length book: premiere scholar of opera and gender, Naomi André. In her book, *Voicing Gender*, she explains that “The eighteenth-century heroic voice, par excellence was that of the ever-flexible and awe-inspiring castrati.”<sup>8</sup> The vocal parallels drawn between castrati and angels connected the higher-pitched male voice to ideas of high-class standing. To sing like an angel associated the castrati with a realm beyond earth, it tied them to a divine class that did not exist in Italian society. “They represented an embodiment of divine power,” claims André, and that divine power brought with it popularity and social stature that had rarely been exhibited by public performers of the mid-sixteenth century Italian opera.<sup>9</sup>

The worshipping of the castrati may have begun with the tonality of their voice, but it was amplified by the androgynous physical body of the singer. Often smooth-faced and lithe in build, castrati were acceptable operatic performers aurally as well as visually. Softer and suppler than the average man, castrati were vocally and physically easy to equate with a feminized body. Yet ironically their higher-pitched vibrato was also associated with signs of virility. Women of the period flocked to their beds, as there was no threat of unwanted pregnancy from the encounter. Descriptions of the castrato voice are often filled with virile terminology: “powerful and strong; it penetrates the accompaniment” says Joke Dame.<sup>10</sup> She continues, “The voice is piercing like a trumpet,

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi André. *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth Century Italian Opera*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Joke Dame. “Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas, eds. New York: Routledge, 2006. 144.

can handle large intervals, [and] has tremendous staying power.”<sup>11</sup> Castrato expert Franz Haböck suggests that “no one could surpass the castrato in force, flexibility, penetrating quality, and fullness of voice and breath control.”<sup>12</sup> The virility of the voice overshadowed the virility of the phallus, leaving the castrati with no shortage of female companionship. The voice of the castrato becomes the body of the castrato.

Despite their soft features, lack of an Adam’s apple, and inability to grow facial hair, the ambiguity of the castrated male body created space for fantasies of otherness to be projected. “With both masculine and feminine features encoded in their physical bodies, the castrati were the ideal singing vessels,” explains André. “They could sing both male and female roles convincingly, and they were even able to continue the ability to embody both genders off the stage.”<sup>13</sup> The androgyny of the castrati lent itself to the androgyny of *travesti* actresses; exciting an audience through the sound of their voices and enticing an audience through the visual spectacle of their feminine bodies in fashionable male costumes.

Although it seems most composers cared more for the sound of their music than the spectacles of such physical performances, the Italian opera utilized the talents of these men to their artistic and financial benefit. Castrato voices were beloved by the ears of opera’s pickiest audiences and the rumors of their sexual appetites and prowess despite their castration procured even more audience intrigue (and box office revenue). “To be sure,” claims Ralph Locke, “vocal beauty is often made the object of fetishistic worship,” especially in the Italian operatic tradition, and the desire created by the voices of castrato

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<sup>11</sup> Dame, 144.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Haböck, *Die Kastraten und ihre Gesangkunst*. Berlin/Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1927. 135.

<sup>13</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*. 29.

were no different than the adoration of a popular diva's aria.<sup>14</sup> For the audiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, André claims that

[...] the castrati's virtuosic and flexible treble timbres embodied heroism; this aesthetic was accepted over, or despite, the grisly knowledge of how this sound came to be. From the mid-nineteenth century up through the present, heroism has been represented through the perceived virility of unaltered male voices... [as a result of this new way of thinking], the castrato became an outdated spectacle.<sup>15</sup>

Although such spectacle was still appreciated in choir performances, the use of the castrati on the public Italian operatic stage began to decline in the eighteenth-century.<sup>16</sup> Considering the vocal ranges necessary for the popular operatic roles, it was necessary for famous castrato roles to be performed anew by female singers. The necessity for female singers to take on male roles originally performed by castrato sopranos would eventually lead to the creation of the Italian *travesti* role.

As a result of the rise and fall of castrati popularity, the Italian opera was forced to find new voices to sing their soprano male leads. Composers, particularly Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), continued to utilize higher vocal ranges for their lead male characters, and female singers were the only option to keep the intended sound of the operatic score.<sup>17</sup> These lead male parts originally written for the ambiguously gendered castrati to perform soon became known as *travesti* roles. Performed by young women, the *travesti* role created a strange sense of cognitive dissonance. The voice of the female

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph P. Locke. "What Are These Women Doing in Opera?" in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera*. Eds. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 65.

<sup>15</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*. 21.

<sup>16</sup> The last of the best castrati, Giambattista Velluti, held on until 1830 when he would finally retire from the Italian operatic stage. (André, *Voicing Gender* 16-17).

<sup>17</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*, 25.

singer could acceptably imitate the known timbres of the lead male character, but the visual of the female singer as male character was not always as convincing.

As André elucidates, the “sound of women’s voices cross-dressed as male characters are infused by an older, and at times nearly forgotten, aesthetic: one that privileges flexible treble timbres to cross gender boundaries.”<sup>18</sup> She continues: “In the *travesti* operas, vocal type, character, and gender are linked together; the gender of the role is primarily articulated through the tessitura (general range where the role has the most notes) of the vocal line.”<sup>19</sup> For the composer, the sex of the singer performing the role did not matter. As long as the performer could successfully hit the notes written for their part, it was assumed that the audience would pay more attention aurally than visually.

“In early opera,” claims Dame, “voices were chosen for their beauty, their potential, their virtuosity, and not for their gender.”<sup>20</sup> Musical distinctions in the libretto were often enough to identify each character’s sex so the avid opera-goer need only close their eyes to hear the pictures painted by the composer. Lead male characters sang soprano with soaring vocal modulations and intertwined their voices with the soprano female lead (although their ranges were often similar, the lead male character sang with much fuller chest resonance while the female lead often sang soprano in a headier voice, unable to match the vocal lilt of her partner). The aural romance of the voices lacing together was more appealing than the physical actions of the singers on the stage, so the

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<sup>18</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Dame, 149.

necessity for the sex of each singer to match the sexed vocal roles they performed was nonexistent.

Similar to the original appeal of the castrati, *travesti* singers quickly became box office fodder. Often praised for their virginal tones and modesty (a very real shift from the virility of the castrati), *travesti* actresses swiftly began to replace castrato singers in the lead male soprano roles of the Italian opera.<sup>21</sup> Their spiraling voices intertwining with the voices of their female co-stars created dynamic duets, and, although they were not as often subject to the same rumors of sexual prowess as their castrato counterparts, the sight of female performers in male garb did excite the scandal-loving public. The convention of a woman playing a male role on the Italian stage was quickly adopted and understood. Yet, different from the castrati who could sometimes pass as women to the unsuspecting audience member, no one in the audience was deceived by the disguise of the *travesti* actress. The audience saw a woman costumed as a male character and heard a voice they accepted as heroic due to its musical intonation.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the travestie roles that would soon grace the London public stage, the composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italian opera began to shift alongside their new singers. Rather than continuing to write castrati roles for women to sing, composers began to create their operas with heroic *travesti* singers in mind. André describes this sensation in musical terms, explaining that operas began to “differentiate between the two female singers through their function in the plot and the tessitura of their

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<sup>21</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*. 4.

<sup>22</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*. 44.



music.”<sup>23</sup> The vocal tessitura of the heroic *travesti* singer (the range within which most notes of a vocal part fall) would remain in the soprano register alongside its lead female counterpart, but the range was often lowered slightly to help audiences aurally distinguish between the characters. The convention of the *travesti* role would remain popular until the mid-nineteenth century.

The rise of the male tenor led composers to shift their music to accommodate the new ideal male heroic voice. The male tenor was uncastrated but still capable of hitting higher notes that could mix and meld gently with the soprano voice, creating a greater distinction between the male and female leads while still allowing the composer to introduce complicated melodies and falsetto love songs that mimicked the popular styles of the castrati and *travesti*. *Travesti* roles were still written for the operatic stage, but they turned from the heroic male lead to the less-prominent pre-pubescent pageboy.<sup>24</sup> Much like the theatrical practice of young boys playing women on the Renaissance stage, composers wrote their pageboys to be performed by young women whose voices were strong enough for opera but still high-pitched enough to mimic the voice of a youth prior to puberty. “No longer the hero, and relegated to the secondary status of the pageboy *travesti* role, women’s voices gradually lost access to their former characterization as men with power,” claims André. Moving from centerstage to the wings, *travesti* performance lost its public appeal, leaving actresses to return to their skirts for the chance of larger roles (and larger paychecks).

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<sup>23</sup> André, Naomi. “Women’s roles in Meyerbeer’s operas: How Italian heroines are reflected in French grand opera,” in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*. Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 104.

<sup>24</sup> André, *Voicing Gender* 103.

Although the shift from heroic *travesti* to pageboy *travesti* was significant in this regard, I contend that the accepted strength and flexibility of the female voice featured in the continued compositions of *travesti* roles led to the eventual domination of the operatic stage by the prima donnas. The aural spectrum of the female *travesti* singers, alongside their ability to perform male characters of heroic and non-heroic standings, paved the way for composers to create more dynamic female heroines in their later operas. The prima donna tradition began in the mid- to late-eighteenth-century, shortly after the shift in female *travesti* performance from heroic to pageboy. Although the Italian operatic *travesti* roles may have met a decline in popularity and stage prominence, they were the necessary bridge between the castrati and the prima donna. The attraction of the *travesti* role was undeniable and would soon travel from the Italian opera to the public stages of London.

Just as the practice became commonplace on the Italian operatic stage, the convention of women portraying men on stage crossed the pond in the late seventeenth century, gaining popularity throughout the eighteenth-century. Although the tradition of a boy or a man playing a woman on the London stage was considered acceptable prior to 1662 (King Charles II issued an edict banning the practice of men playing women's parts on London public stages), the new practice from Italy forced questions of gender, class, and celebrity status to the forefront. Much like the original castrati roles of the Italian opera, English playwrights (prior to King Charles II's ban) wrote their male characters with the intention of having male actors portray them. The convention of a female actress performing a male character on the English public stage was a new idea, equal parts exciting and upsetting for the general public. The first travestie performance on record

was presented by a minor actress at Drury Lane: Jane Long played the role of Osiris in Settle's *Cambyses* in 1671. The first leading comedienne to perform travestie in London was Susannah Verbruggen in 1696, playing the eunuch Achmet in Mary Pix's *Ibrahim, The Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks*.<sup>25</sup> In 1672, three plays were performed during the same month that featured entirely female casts: Killigrew's *The Parson's Wedding*, Dryden's *Secret Love*, and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster*.<sup>26</sup> The plays were so popular, especially *Secret Love* with Betty Boutell in the lead role.<sup>27</sup>

The *travesti* performances of the Italian opera resulted from the necessity for higher-pitched voices after the practice of the operatic castrati began to decline, whereas the travestie performances of the popular public English stage had no such push. Instead, this breed of cross-dressed performance began out of the personal desires of actresses and the box office dreams of entrepreneurial theatre managers to emulate the premiere theatricals of the Italians. Swapping the *i* for a *ie*, *travesti* became *travestie* in the early eighteenth-century English vernacular, highlighting the locational and vocational shifts of the term. Travestie, as it is defined in the remainder of this dissertation, became a uniquely English theatrical convention with uniquely English implications and complications. The eighteenth-century saw a complex relationship between those who approved of the anti-establishment movements of the Restoration period and those who fought back against such immoral actions and thoughts. The Merry King Charles II had created a space in the theatre that promoted freedom of speech. This freedom gave rise to social commentary on the subjects of class, sex, and religious institutions; often finding

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 57

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 57-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 58

class structures to be flawed, scenes of sexual interactions to be comedic, and religious institutions to be corrupt.

One prime example of a critic of the theatre was Jeremy Collier, an English theatre critic, non-juror bishop, and theologian. He was so taken aback by the bawdy playhouse and immoral plays of the Restoration stage that he wrote a famous treatise on the matter: “A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.” In this not-so-short pamphlet, he attacks popular playwrights of the age (William Wycherley, John Dryden, William Congreve, and more), accusing them of including depraved acts of profanity, indecency, and blasphemy within their plays. Despite this hatred, Collier still continued to see popular English theatre and print his critiques—even though his words rarely turned audiences away from the public stage. Collier emphatically claims:

The business of plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice; to show the uncertainty of human greatness, the sudden turns of fate, and the unhappy conclusions of violence and injustice; ‘tis to expose the singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly and falsehood contemptible, and to bring everything that is ill under infamy and neglect. This design has been oddly pursued by the English stage. Our poets write with a different view and are gone into another interest... Their liberties in the following particulars are intolerable, viz., their smuttiness of expression; their swearing, profaneness, and lewd application of Scripture; their abuse of the clergy; their making their top characters libertines and giving them success in their debauchery...<sup>28</sup>

He knew the academic potential of the theatre to teach proper morals and acceptable decorum, and he was afraid that the theatre and the plays presented within its walls were damaging English society. He wanted the theatre to stop presenting sexual material to the

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<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Collier. *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage: Together with The Sense of Antiquity upon this Argument*. Second ed. London: S. Keble, R. Sace, and H. Hindmarch, 1698. 2.

audience for the sake of his own pious belief system, but he still paradoxically continued to attend the theatre.

The eighteenth-century stage was a place of opposites and gray spaces. Revivals of Restoration comedies were popular choices for the larger public theatres of London.<sup>29</sup> Some eighteenth-century playwrights continued the Restoration conventions, composing raucous comedies to spurn and criticize public personalities, social behaviors, and religious institutions.<sup>30</sup> Others were more focused on pure entertainment, using only the spectacles of the Restoration theatre in their work with the hope of luring in audiences with flash, glamour, and humor.<sup>31</sup> Some playwrights attempted to reform their audiences through a piece's religious and social morals.<sup>32</sup> And still others wrote their plays primarily for financial gain.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Revivals of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, Congreve's *Love for Love* (*The Way of the World* was not quite as popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century despite its recent resurgence in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms), Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* and *The Provoked Wife*, and George Farquahar's *The Constant Couple*, *The Recruiting Officer*, and *The Beaux Strategem* remained in the repertoire of Drury Lane and Covent Garden into the eighteenth-century.

<sup>30</sup> Susanna Centlivre's plays are prime examples of this style. In her 1718 play *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, she criticizes the Tories, religious hypocrisies, and greed. She does much of the same in her plays *The Busy Body* and *The Perplex'd Lovers*. Almost all of Henry Fielding's works fall into this category as well. *The Author's Farce* (1730) ridiculed the London theatre managers that denied him entry at the beginning of his career. *The Modern Husband* (1732), *The Lottery* (1732), *The Miser* (1732), and *Pasquin* (1736) also fall under this classification.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Johnson's 1729 nonsense play *Hurlothrumbo* relied heavily on music, dancing, and spectacle for its comedy to come across successfully. Many of David Garrick's pieces also fit into this category, including *Miss in Her Teens; or The Medley of Lovers* (1747), *The Country Girl* (1766, a tamer adaptation of *The Country Wife*), and *The Jubilee* (1769, based on his Shakespeare Pageant). Furthermore, laughing comedies like Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) and *The School for Scandal* (1777) were widely admired for their comic ironies and gaiety upon the stage.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1632) was often revived on the eighteenth-century stage. Joseph Addison's 1712 *Cato, a Tragedy* and George Lillo's 1731 *The London Merchant; Or, The History of George Barnwell* are also examples of popular, tragic plays that focused on reforming their audiences.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771), and Carlo Goldoni's commedia inspired *The Servant of Two Masters* (1746) are examples of plays with long runs that were written either for financial gain (Cumberland's play sympathized with British colonizers) or by request (Goldoni wrote his play for the great Truffaldino actors of the period, Antonio Sacco).

John Gay's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera* was the most popular example of this theatre of opposites, and many of its revivals included successful travestie performances of its main character.<sup>34</sup> The innovative play with music tells the story of a killer highwayman, Captain Macheath, who marries the "good" girl from a bad family, Polly Peachum. Through his own actions and the actions of the corrupt world around him, Macheath is sentenced to hang for his immoral misdeeds but still manages to defy moral justice and move out of the slums of society. A clever and attractive criminal, Macheath is presented onstage as an endearing and roguish antihero. All those who know him know that he is not to be trusted, yet they continue to support and surround him. In the dog-eat-dog world of *The Beggar's Opera*, it really is every man (and woman) for themselves and that knowledge allows the audience to give Macheath the love often reserved for heroic protagonists (in spite of his immoral profession and pleasures).

Macheath's duplicitous nature parallels the mercurial public of the period. The religiously devout could be found seated in the theatre next to the whoring thief. Public officials who preached social morality could also be found hiding behind the privacy curtains of their theatre boxes with young orange wenches buying much more from these ladies than their citrus wares.<sup>35</sup> Macheath could be understood as an everyman character, doing his best to survive the mean streets of London. When he is caught once more and there is no reprieve in sight, Macheath sings a song of repentance:

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<sup>34</sup> *The Beggar's Opera* ran 62 performances in a row—unheard of in its time. (John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1808. 5.)

<sup>35</sup> In his 1702 tract, *A Scourge for the Play-Houses: Or, the Character of the English-Stage*, Richard Burrige recalls an evening at the theatre: "But going thro Play-House-Yard, one Saucy Impudent Slut or another would, in a manner, be forcing her *Oranges* on us, talking some of them so Impudently, that I could no otherwise suppose, but that they had been Debauch'd in the Mother's Womb, and so came acute Whores into the World." (Arthur Freeman, ed. *The English Stage, Attack and Defense 1577-1730: Antitheatrical Tracts, 1702-1704*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974. 3.)

The Charge is prepar'd; the Lawyers are met,  
The Judges all rang'd (a terrible Show!)  
I go, undismay'd.—For Death is a Debt,  
A Debt on Demand.—So take what I owe.  
Then farewell, my Love—Dear Charmers, adieu.  
Contented I die—'Tis the better for you.  
Here ends all Disputes the rest of our Lives,  
For this way at once I please all my Wives.<sup>36</sup>

Although this may seem much too little far too late for the more moralistic members of the audience, Macheath's courage and humor in the face of imminent death wins over his audience. When he is brought to the gallows in the final act, the Beggar and the Player in the growing crowd below the scaffolds converse briefly about the audience expectations for their hero:

PLAYER: But, honest Friend, I hope you don't intend that Macheath shall be really executed.

BEGGAR: Most certainly, Sir.—To make the Piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical Justice.—Macheath is to be hang'd; and for the other Personages of the Drama, the Audience must have suppos'd they were all either hang'd or transported.

PLAYER: Why then, Friend, this is a downright deep Tragedy. The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily.

BEGGAR: Your Objection, Sir, is very just, and is easily remov'd. For you must allow, that in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about—So—you Rabble there—run and cry, A Reprieve!—let the Prisoner be brought back to his Wives in Triumph.

PLAYER: All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town.<sup>37</sup>

Gay knew that his duplicitous hero, though villainous in his actions, would still be loved by the audience for his charm and for the satire that he represented. As Francis Gentleman of *The Dramatic Censor* wrote in 1770 of the play,

...there is scarce any moral deducible from the BEGGAR'S OPERA; that it is, upon the whole, a loathsome, infectious carcase, clothed in an angelic garb; that it is founded upon solid sense and satiric truth, yet rises into a superstructure of licentiousness; that it is highly entertaining, not at all instructive; that it is an

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<sup>36</sup> Gay, John. *The Beggar's Opera*. Claud Lovat Fraser, ed. Project Gutenberg Online, April 13, 2008. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25063/25063-h/25063-h.htm> (accessed July 13, 2017). 83.

<sup>37</sup> Gay, 90-1.

exquisite burlesque upon Italian operas, and not a little so upon virtue; that it is inflammatory with humour, and vulgar with eloquence; in short, it is one of those bewitching evils, which offended reason must wish had never been brought to light, while delighted taste must lament the very idea of its annihilation.<sup>38</sup>

The play was a double-edged sword, playing to all sides of the multi-faceted eighteenth-century London theatre-going audience. Macheath was a vigilante without any moral compass, yet his character was recognizably satirical. Killing the hero rather than getting him married to the lovely heroine, Polly Peachum, would have angered much of the public who attended the play. The endearing rogue is thus saved from the gallows and ends the play pronouncing his marriage to Polly with a lively dance.

From one point of view, the *deus ex machina*-esque reprieve of the antihero in the final moments of the play is a scathing and satirical review of the inner-workings of English society at the time. Macheath's absolution implies that it does not matter what wrongs you commit in life you can still make it out on top as long as you know the right people and have the money to pay for their support. Looking through a moralistic lens instead, the ending of the play announces that any and all men can be forgiven for their sins, as long as they publicly repent for their transgressions (whether Macheath is sincere in his repentance is another matter altogether).<sup>39</sup> Left to audience interpretation, the play's ending could be understood in either light. Gay's comic opera was both a commentary on the immoralities of London society and a religiously motivated honorific

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<sup>38</sup> Francis Gentleman. "The Beggar's Opera" in *The Dramatic Censor; or, Critical Companion*, 1770. (As quoted in A.C. Ward, ed. *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism: XVII-XX Centuries*. London: Oxford University Press, 1945. 83.

<sup>39</sup> The play was criticized most heavily by Rev. Thomas Herring, "a militant divine" who was the preacher at Lincoln's Inn in 1728 (attached to the theatre where *The Beggar's Opera* was performed). He railed against the ending the play, claiming that Macheath's repentance was insincere and, therefore, not enough to pardon the highwayman. Due to this insincerity, Herring claimed that the play was immoral, unjust, and unfit for the religiously mercurial audiences of the London public stage. Herring's complaints are detailed in Charles E. Pearce's book, *Polly Peachum: Being the Story of Lavinia Fenton and The Beggar's Opera*. New York: Brentano's, 1913. 152.



attempting to teach its audience to repent for their sins so that they, too, could be pardoned like Macheath.

Boasting the longest theatrical run of the century, *The Beggar's Opera* quickly became a staple of many career performers and many theatrical repertoires.<sup>40</sup> Some of the best actresses of the period would be known for their portrayals of Polly Peachum (Lavinia Fenton, Kitty Clive, and Susanna Cibber to name a few), and many of the first travestie actresses would grace the stage as Macheath. To see an actress sing songs of love and lasciviously fondle other female actresses on a public stage was undoubtedly an exciting experience for many theatregoers of the period. Such same-sex actions were frowned upon in society, and witnessing such forbidden acts performed publicly must have been rather stimulating (for the audience and for the box office). The layered gender dynamics of such casting choices also undoubtedly rankled the more religiously-minded members of the audience. Asking them to suspend their disbelief in Macheath's sincerity was one thing, asking them to look past the performance of such a roguish character by an actress was an entirely different request.

#### *From Petticoats to Pants*

Much like the disguises necessary for its performance, travestie as a genre resulted from shifting roles in the theatrical scene. With actresses still being fairly new to the public stage, there was a fair amount of work that needed to be done first before these performing pioneers could pants up for such roles. As Lesley Ferris describes in her book *Acting Women*, "the absence of women in theatre created the notion of woman as a sign,

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<sup>40</sup> *The Beggar's Opera* ran an unprecedented 62 nights at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre.

a symbolic object manipulated and controlled artistically by male playwrights and male actors.”<sup>41</sup> The voices of female characters, written through the pens of men, were shaded by this knowledge. Women on stage were crafted in idealized (and patriarchal) ways, fitting them neatly into prescribed boxes of femininity that matched with the social and gendered hierarchies of the period.

Ferris continues: “When women begin to act for the first time another discovery reveals itself: far from being credited with artistic invention, skill or talent, actresses merely play themselves, a patriarchal premise that conveniently and skillfully removes women from any possibility of cultural creativity.”<sup>42</sup> Actresses, once allowed on the public stage, often performed idealized notions of womanhood that had been penned and prescribed by their male counterparts.<sup>43</sup> Such female roles were often simplistic archetypes of femininity, and very rarely were these characters as complex or three-dimensional as the male characters they played opposite. Despite such creative stifling in their performances, the majority of actresses who found themselves pioneering the profession upon the English stage had little choice in their roles and often found themselves in constant comparison to and competition with their younger female co-stars for audience favor and theatrical approval.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lesley Ferris. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. New York: New York University Press, 1989. Xi.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, Xi.

<sup>43</sup> While the eighteenth-century does include some of the first successful female playwrights (Aphra Behn, Susanna Centlivre, Mary Mix, Catherine Trotter, and Delariviere Manley) and theatre co-managers, these roles were not public-facing like the work of the actresses of the London stages. There was a great difference between how female playwrights and actresses were perceived and understood by the larger eighteenth-century audience.

<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that there weren't also women who made great strides during this period for gender equality on the London public stages. Some of the biggest stars of the stage had roles written for them (albeit roles that primarily still fit within socially accepted gender mores) and a few even helped to manage theatres alongside their male counterparts. Anne Oldfield and Anne Bracegirdle are good

Before actresses could tread the boards in travestie, they had to make their presence acceptable on the stage (leaving the fight for more multifaceted roles to be fought by later generations of actresses). Displacing young boy actors in their repertoire of female roles, actresses pushed their way into the public theatre playing simplistic, male-designed characters that exemplified traditional models of femininity. From the Restoration forward (once actresses became a consistent staple on the public stage and King Charles II decreed that all female roles were to be played by women), many comedies began to include three-dimensional, complex female characters and exciting breeches roles that showcased the various sides of womanhood. What Lesley Ferris calls the archetype of the Wilfull Woman can be understood as the contrarian female protagonist.<sup>45</sup> Wily, cunning, and often a beauty to behold, these characters help craft the narrative of the plot, scheming and matchmaking without full awareness of the consequences of their actions. Ferris gives her definition of willful as thus:

A double edge: applied pejoratively to a child, it conveys headstrong, obstinate, self-willed. But used in a wider context it also implies strength, autonomy, decisive action. A person who performs ‘willful’ actions intends them deliberately, not accidentally.<sup>46</sup>

Although Ferris goes so far as to claim that willful women are representative of “evil” women, I propose to offer a different understanding of the term that shows the beginnings of eighteenth-century shifts in gender understandings.<sup>47</sup> I claim that Willful Women characters, though sometimes perpetrators of evil deeds, are only prescribed as evil for their willingness to act against the wishes and demands of men, which was not

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examples of these celebrity actresses as well as the late eighteenth-century phenom, Sarah Siddons. But these actresses are the exception to the much larger rule.

<sup>45</sup> Ferris, 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ferris, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ferris, 111.

considered a feminine virtue in the period. Rather than equate strong actions with evil actions, I believe that the Willful Woman archetype gives agency to female bodies and voices on the stage. The agency of these female characters is part of what I believe leads to the travestie role. Although some strong actions may have evil intentions, that is simply not the case with all Willful Women characters. These roles (only found in comedies of the period) brought humorous attention to the follies of both genders, asking audiences to laugh at themselves and their companions while simultaneously opening up avenues of conversation relating to the complex relationships between eighteenth-century ideas of traditional gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation.

Breeches roles pushed the boundaries of gender construction even further, resulting in what Ferris calls “monstrous contradictions.”<sup>48</sup> Her use of monstrous is telling, it belies the unnaturalness of viewing a woman in breeches within the public sphere. Breeches roles of the period are defined as female roles performed by actresses where the female character chooses to disguise herself as a man for purposes of plot progression but returns to her skirts and admits her disguise by the end of the play. Often using masculine disguise to spy on potential lovers or to gain access to masculine spaces, breeches parts were comedic roles that flirtatiously played with audience desires. These characters began the play in their socially constructed and gendered places, donned form-fitting breeches for comic purposes, and, most importantly, returned to their skirts and their prescribed gender roles by the ending of the piece. Breeches roles almost always cpwillful women roles; they gave some agency and power to the female character and, thus, to the actress portraying her on the stage. But, by returning to her skirts and

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<sup>48</sup> Ferris, 147.

relinquishing the power of her pants, she transforms back into the benevolent and submissive woman that she is expected to be. Any subversive potential in their gender disguise is nullified by the costumed return to normalcy. As scholar Elizabeth Howe writes, “breeches roles became little more than yet another means of displaying the actress as sexual object.”<sup>49</sup> She continues,

In most cases a woman dons male disguise as an unnatural action caused by some obstacle to her marrying her lover or otherwise getting her own way. Once her wishes are met she almost invariably returns, like her Renaissance predecessor, to a conventional female role at the end of the play.<sup>50</sup>

Their public follies in men’s garb were understood as just that: follies meant for the visual entertainment of the audience. The unnaturalness of the actress in breeches was noted as humorous, a comical joke without any social repercussions. As long as she returned to her skirts by the end of the play, she was forgiven for her non-normative actions. These breeches characters (female characters performed by actresses who disguised themselves for the purpose of deceiving other characters) were never intended to be mistaken for men by the audience. The male disguise was a plot point; a moment of gender burlesque for the sake of comedy.

The popularity of breeches roles gave actresses of the eighteenth-century the idea to begin performing the genre of travestie. As noted by Howe, some 375 plays produced on the public London stage between 1660-1700 alone included 89 breeches role and 14 travestie roles.<sup>51</sup> Breeches characters like Sylvia in *The Recruiting Officer* pleased crowds, and the more pleased the crowd, the more money for the theatre and its performers. While much of the appeal of the breeches role came from the wink and nod

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<sup>49</sup> Howe, 59

<sup>50</sup> Howe, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Howe, 57. That number includes alterations of pre-Restoration plays.

to the audience, it would be remiss to claim that the excitement of seeing a young woman's body wrapped in the tight linens of men's breeches had nothing to do with it. Acting for women was still tightly entwined with the vocabulary of the brothel, and travestie roles did not help to eliminate the connections. As will be discussed later in this dissertation, travestie (and the connotations that adjoined it) required actresses to perform in various ways on and off the English public stage.

The female pioneers of the acting profession on London public stages used their performances of patriarchal machinations to expand the ways women could be seen in the public sphere. The first actresses on the public English stage made room for future actresses to expand the repertoire of female characters. Their ingenuity in making simplistic characters more complicated suggested to playwrights that they should begin expanding their ideas of how women and femininity could and should be presented on the stage. Their performances made space for future actresses to not only play more dynamic characters, but also pushed the boundaries of gender on stage. By performing willful and breeched characters, actresses expanded the minds of their audiences and, through the eventual performances of travestie, they challenged the social and gendered norms of the period.

Of all of the most popular travestie actresses of the eighteenth-century, none of them began their official onstage careers in pants. They entered the public eye playing the roles of silent women, youthful muses, and penitent whores. Finding their way into willful women roles, these actresses were able to showcase their quick wit and comedic timing, two incredibly important attributes when performing breeches and travestie roles. The women discussed in this dissertation (and many of their contemporaries) may have

begun their careers in skirts, but their careers were made in pants. Once they became popular in breeches roles, it was only a matter of time before many actresses transitioned into travestie.<sup>52</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The genealogy of travestie is a long and somewhat complicated one. Tracing the lineage of the performance genre is fairly simple, but the motives behind each change in audience reception is much harder to pinpoint. As social norms shifted through history, the audience slowly became more receptive to the idea of women on stage, let alone when wearing breeches. A woman displaying her body for a public crowd still brought with it connotations of prostitution and the fact that these actresses were working in a field originally meant for men implied a denial of her subservience and reliance on a masculine man. Returning to the etymology of travestie once more, travestie actresses were *trans*; they were women who often performed traditional gender identities and representations off stage but their onstage gender disguises connoted a dissonant gender representation that implied gender roles counter to the norm.

Breeches roles asked the audience to join them in laughing at the follies of both sexes whilst selling tickets to audience members keen on seeing a woman's shapely figure in form-fitting trousers. Transferring from breeches roles to travestie roles seems like an obvious next step but making such a leap required much more forgiveness from the audience. The social implications of a woman donning male attire and a male persona required audiences to realize that gender was artificially constructed.

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<sup>52</sup> The transition from travestie to modern burlesque will be explored in detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

As renowned gender scholar Judith Halberstam explores in her book *Female Masculinity* (and especially within her chapter “Perverse Presentism: The Androgyne, the Tribade, the Female Husband, and Other Pre-Twentieth-Century Genders”), women who performed traditionally masculine identities in public spaces were considered “freak[s] of nature,” monstrous women whose attacks on masculinity

urges us to reconsider our most basic assumptions about the functions, forms, and representations of masculinity and forces us to ask why the bond between men and masculinity has remained relatively secure despite the continuous assaults made by feminists, gays, lesbians, and gender-queers on the naturalness of gender.<sup>53</sup>

Any woman could now portray a man on a public London stage just the same as any young man had portrayed women on the same stages for years. The conflation of Man and Masculinity was questioned within these performances, illuminating the idea that representations of men on the stage were not nearly as complicated as they may have originally been understood to be. When the audience applauded a woman performing in a travestie role, they were simultaneously applauding her ability to wear the mantle of masculinity.

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<sup>53</sup> Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998. 55, 45.



CHAPTER TWO  
COMIC AND TRAGIC TRAVESTIE:  
THE MANY HUMORS OF MARGARET “PEG” WOFFINGTON

Margaret “Peg” Woffington (1710?-1760) was a theatrical force to be reckoned with. Entering the theatre at an early age, she was an incredibly popular actress throughout her entire career.<sup>1</sup> Comedic timing was her forte; quick-witted and lively, the young Miss Woffington captured the heart (and the eyes) of all who saw her. “She was naturally proud of her perfect figure,” claims Augustin Daly, perhaps her most vigilant biographer. And she was not averse to displaying the shapeliness of her form. Whether in the trendiest fashions in the streets or in the tight-fitting breeches of the stage, Miss Woffington took care in presenting her best side to the public eye. A natural beauty, her delicate features and charming smile were complimented by her attention to fashion details. Despite such vanities, she was beloved by her public. Newspapers and chapbooks about her life and her performances were common fare and her image was proliferated through London society paintings by famous artists. She was also the subject of many calling cards. Similar to collectible baseball cards, it was incredibly popular to accumulate these small images of favorite public personalities (kings, queens, actors, and the like).

Miss Woffington made herself a commodity for public consumption, an image to hang in a high-class drawing room or a vision dancing in the memory her audience’s

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<sup>1</sup> The subject of Miss Woffington’s birth year will be addressed later in this chapter.

minds. “Everybody had to see her,” exclaims Daly. “Everybody who was anybody did see her. The Cherokee chiefs who were visiting England in state joined the enraptured throng of admirers, and declared that the only thing she lacked to make her a perfect woman was –a copper skin!”<sup>2</sup> Although there is record of a Cherokee chief visiting England and being entertained by the best performers of the London stage, there is no note of who made the list of those performers. Yet, this moment of possible apocrypha made its way into Daly’s extensive account of Miss Woffington’s life.

Daly’s account in itself is a representation of Miss Woffington’s success. Written almost a century after her own passing, her life and career had been so influential to have been presented in much detail to the young Mr. Daly. In hearing stories of her life, her beauty, and her formidable talents upon the stage, Daly became obsessed with locating and documenting as much of her life as possible. What we might now call a “fan boy,” Daly’s fascination with Miss Woffington is evident in the pages of his memoir of the actress.<sup>3</sup> Yet, such fascinating stories (for they are often written as stories without proper citations) were not enough to bring Miss Woffington to the forefront of eighteenth-century English theatre scholarship. Miss Woffington is often excluded in the larger contexts of theatre history of the eighteenth-century English stage, most historians choosing to focus on the extensive and volatile career of actor/playwright/manager David Garrick instead.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustin Daly, *Woffington: A Tribute to the Actress and the Woman*. Second Edition. Troy, New York: Nims and Knight, 1891. 28.

<sup>3</sup> A prominent theatre manager in his own right, Daly’s preoccupation with Miss Woffington is also represented in his crafting of actress Ada Rehan’s career. He created Rehan’s image as a duplicate of Miss Woffington’s, a prominent breeches actress whose success mirrored that of Miss Woffington.

An actress of many faces whose career was boosted through her travestie performances, Miss Woffington was intimately connected with some of the most important actors, managers, and theatrical companies of her time (including David Garrick). Famed in England and Ireland, her career upon the boards was long and hearty with the inevitable peaks and valleys that befell all actresses. Unafraid to play any role, Miss Woffington portrayed varied parts to great success. In *The Beggar's Opera* alone, she performed the parts of Polly (the willful woman), Mrs. Peachum (the old mother), and Macheath (in travestie). She was valiant in her tragic roles but she shined in comedies. Miss Woffington was known for her humor and wit off and on stage and was particularly praised for her travestie and breeches performances. Numerous wits immortalized her in verse:

That excellent Peg!  
Who showed such a leg,  
When lately she dressed in man's clothes—  
A creature uncommon,  
Who's both man and woman  
And the chief of the belles and the beaux!<sup>4</sup>

With such delightful poetry as anecdotal evidence of her physical form and her acting talents, it is not difficult to understand Miss Woffington's stage appeal for the eighteenth-century audience. She was a powerhouse performer, able to represent both genders upon the stage as best suited her. Her figure was praised and admired by all who saw her in breeches, men and women alike.

A staple actress of the eighteenth-century stage, it is curious that her life is often but a footnote in theatrical scholarship of the period. Daly responds to this same query in the opening chapter of his biography of Miss Woffington, saying "Perhaps it is because

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<sup>4</sup> Daly, 19.

the triumphs of the heroines of comedy do not stimulate the efforts of serious biographers—for biographers are a serious lot. The laughter-loving goddesses of the stage are, perhaps, too light and fleeting for their heavy pens.”<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I aim to take Daly’s claim a step further. Through analyzing the most popular and least popular travestie roles of Miss Woffington’s career, I plan to juxtapose the audience’s reactions to comedic and tragic travestie performances as a means to understand the larger context of the travestie genre as it relates to social and gendered anxieties of the eighteenth-century. Through this analysis, I aim to explore how Miss Woffington’s travestie performance may have influenced theatre historians to leave her career as a footnote of theatre history rather than as a foremost trailblazer of the period.

### *Travestie Character Archetypes*

Travestie roles became increasingly popular on the eighteenth-century English stage. The role of Captain Macheath was a common favorite for first time travestie performers. A charismatic highwayman, Macheath is a lover of women and a thief of the highest order. A clever and attractive criminal living within the dog-eat-dog world of *The Beggar’s Opera*, Macheath is both a tragic and comedic character at various points within the musical play. A humorous and charming rake in his interactions with Polly, Lucy, and his band of criminals, he is a lovable Romeo. But in the final act of the piece, he is thrown into jail and unable to escape. He sings a song repenting his ways, is taken to the gallows and is granted a reprieve by the King’s messenger who just so happens to show up at the right moment.

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<sup>5</sup> Daly, 3.

I claim that the part of Macheath was used by many actresses as their first foray into travestie performance for the same reason Gay didn't kill off his antihero. The plot of the faux opera allowed actresses the freedom to humorously portray the charming rake character throughout the majority of the play. Stretching their performances into the realm of tragic travestie during the jail scenes, actresses could practice their portrayals of the male sex in moments of true despair. In the final moments of the play, the travestie would again turn comic, laughing in the face of his imminent death and dancing with his new bride.

Captain Macheath is a dynamic character, both comic and tragic at different points within the play. The roles most often performed as travestie by actresses of the eighteenth-century fell into one of two main character archetypes: the comedic Charming Rake or the tragic Lustful Villain. Each of these tropes created different dynamics upon the stage, especially when performed by a young actress. From delightful flirtations, to stolen romantic touches, to sword fights and duels, these characters took the agency and autonomy of the willful woman and the brazen bravery of breeches to a new extreme. Sometimes attractive and sometimes dangerous, these travestie archetypes led to very different reactions from their audience.

The charming rake was a staple of the comedy genre. These lead roles were often the love interest of the young heroine (or heroines), flirtatious and gallant and often getting themselves caught in ridiculous situations. Humorous and light-hearted, this archetypal travestie role was most popular among eighteenth-century English audiences. The other style of travestie role, the lustful villain, was rarely as successful. These roles were often supporting rather than leading roles. They were usually either the

spurned ex-lover or the jealous and greedy extra-marital love interest of the heroine. Leading her down the path of sin, these characters had dark intentions and lascivious words, and were often disposed of by the end of the play. Many of the best travestie actresses attempted to perform these tragic villainous roles during their careers, but they were rarely the same box office hit as their comedic counterparts.

A versatile actress, Miss Woffington played every part she could, from sentimental ingénues and robust servant girls to ugly crones and lavish men of culture.<sup>6</sup> Daly notes Miss Woffington's ability to perform roles outside her age, playing both Mrs. Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera* and Midnight Mother in Farquhar's *Twin Rivals* before the age of eighteen.<sup>7</sup> But Miss Woffington's performances of travestie roles (specifically comedic rake roles) were incredibly popular. Lively, charming, and a delight to look at, her travestie and breeches performances gave rise to her theatrical career. "Her figure was a veritable model of perfection," claims biographer Willis J. Abbot, "and her genius for aping the manners and carriage of the sterner sex charmed the town of Dublin, then esteemed as great a dramatic center as London itself."<sup>8</sup> Performing in breeches showcased her comedic timing as well as her feminine shape.

Although she was considered an absolute powerhouse star, her popularity as an actress often seemed to hinge on her physical beauty and her performances in pants. Between the tantalizing look of her legs in tight-fitting trousers and her ability to perform maleness in such a way that amused and intrigued her public, Miss Woffington carved a

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Marinacci, *Leading Ladies: A Gallery of Famous Actresses*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1961. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Daly, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Willis J. Abbot, *Women of History: The Lives of Women Who In All Ages, All Lands and In All Womanly Occupations Have Won Fame and Put Their Imprint on the World's History*. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1913. 348.

niche for herself in the English theatrical community. Amusing as and amused by the opposite sex, Miss Woffington was able to capitalize on comic travestie roles in a way that was not possible for her to do in tragic travestie roles.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will look to Miss Woffington's performances of both travestie archetypes, analyzing the differences in audience reception of each. Beginning with the comedic charming rake, I will turn to what is perhaps Miss Woffington's best known role: Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar's sentimental comedy *The Constant Couple*. Pivoting to tragic travestie, I will analyze her performance of the lustful villain Lothario from Nicholas Rowe's she-tragedy *The Fair Penitent*. Comparing the reception of each role, I aim to better understand the connections between comedy, tragedy, and the travestie genre, analyzing how the popularity of the travestie role relied heavily on the audience's ability to understand the genre as non-threatening and humorous. I claim that this understanding leads to the shifting definition of travestie as burlesque or farce, pushing the limits of gendered hierarchies on stage while under the guise of harmless fun.

#### *The Sentimental Comedy's Charming Rake: Sir Harry Wildair*

Although only popular for a short span of time relatively speaking, the genre of the sentimental comedy reigned supreme over eighteenth-century English audiences. Written in direct reaction to the raunchy, rowdy restoration comedies of the century before, these pieces were aimed at showing the human condition in a more virtuous light. Characters in these plays are tempted by various sins but, through their noble sentiments and the help of honorable friends, they overcome their obstacles and are set back on the

path to righteousness. Colley Cibber first introduced the genre in 1696 with his play *Love's Last Shift* and, after seeing its success, many of his contemporaries continued the trend.

One dramatic critic of the period, Thomas Davies, recalled the audience reaction to Cibber's dramatic genre shift, commenting on how the plot of the play "spread such an uncommon rapture of pleasure in the audience that never were spectators more happy in easing their minds by uncommon and repeated plaudits and honest tears."<sup>9</sup> The reconciliation of the characters and the emotional rollercoaster of delight and devoted tears solidified the new genre as a staple in many theatrical seasons for the next fifty years. Yet, as with all new things, the genre would eventually become stale as the world of the late eighteenth-century shifted, leaving the sentimental comedy to be absorbed into more dramatic, domestic tragedies (like the she-tragedy to be discussed later in this chapter).

Despite Richard Steele's claim to writing the most sentimental comedies, the cornerstone of the genre is often understood to be George Farquhar's *The Constant Couple*, written at the turn of the century in 1699. The elaborate but amusing plot is two-fold: the "A plot" concerning Lady Lurewell's schemes against all the men in her life and the "B plot" revolving around the (mis)adventures of the comedic Charming Rake character, Sir Harry Wildair.<sup>10</sup> The plots become entwined upon Wildair's return to the

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Davies. *Dramatic Miscellanies: Consisting of Critical Observations on Several Plays of Shakspeare, with a Review of His Principal Characters, and Those of Various Eminent Writers, as Represented by Mr. Garrick and Other Celebrated Comedians with Anecdotes of Dramatic Poets, Actors, &c.* Third Edition. Dublin: Printed for S. Price, H. Whitestone, W. Wilson, R. Moncrieffe, L. White, R. Marchbank, T. Walker, P. Byrne, R. Burton, J. Cash, W. Sleater, 1784. 411–412.

<sup>10</sup> Pronounced "Will-dare." A tenet of this genre (like many of the Restoration comedies before them) is the use of aptronym when naming characters—choosing names that describe the characteristics of a character. In this case, Sir Harry Wildair (when pronounced correctly) adds more to the joke of his daring character. Similarly, Lady Lurewell has no problem attracting men and her eventual beau, Colonel



town from his travels across Europe. The main characters of Wildair, Standard, Lurewell, and Angelica play musical chairs, scheming and trapping each other in their various convoluted webs. Wildair is eventually ensnared into marriage with the young gentlewoman, Angelica, and the loyal Captain Standard is revealed to be the same man Lady Lurewell has been longing for since her youth. As with the endings of all successful sentimental comedies, morals are preached, weddings are performed, and light-hearted dancing ensues.

Sentimental comedies can be recognized through two main conventions: the appearance of tragic characters who receive happy endings and the use of foppish characteristics in a lead male role. In the case of *The Constant Couple*, both Captain Standard and Lady Lurewell present tragic faces amidst the comic actions of the characters around them. Standard has lost his command, his money, and the woman to whom he has proposed marriage. An honorable man, he will not accept charity without it being earned. When he falls in love with Lady Lurewell (unaware that she is the lover he lost so long ago), he is emotionally torn apart for his improper feelings toward a woman to whom he is not betrothed. Lady Lurewell's comedic schemes stem from her own tragic life; having lost her virginity in her youth to a travelling soldier who never returned, she was never able to properly marry. She is broken hearted and repents the illicit affair; she resigns herself to becoming an old maid alone and makes it her personal duty to keep men from doing to young women what was done to her.

When either character talks about their tragedies, their language is heightened from the vernacular banter of the rest of the play into a more classically tragic style of

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Standard, is what could easily be considered the 'gold standard' (or benchmark) of what a good man should be.

speaking. Lady Lurewell proclaims of her missing soldier, “Alas! I know him not, which makes my Wrongs the greater!”<sup>11</sup> Nowhere else in the play does she use such exclamations. Lurewell closes the conversation of her “dear dissembler” with the following promise: “Here I will play my last Scene; then retire to my Country-House, live solitary, and die a Penitent... ‘Tis love of him that keeps my Anger warm.”<sup>12</sup> But, as this is a comedy after all, both Standard and Lurewell realize in the final moments of the play who they are to each other. Crossing paths once more, they learn of their mistaken identities, vow their everlasting love to one another, and join Wildair and Angelica in marital bliss.

Continuing with the conventions of sentimental comedy, Sir Harry Wildair’s character of the comedic charming rake is a foppish character. This is exemplified in his words, actions, and costume. The costume for Wildair is brightly colored and of the highest fashion of the period. His tri-corner hat is always feathered and his shoe buckles always shiny. Tight-fitting breeches show off his form, and his sword is held at the hip in a beautifully ornate sheath. “An airy Gentleman affecting humerous [*sic*] Gaity [*sic*] and Freedom in his Behaviour,” Farquhar’s description of Wildair hinted at the liveliness of spirit necessary for the part to work. The actor (or actress) playing Wildair must balance a charming and witty presence, a devil-may-care attitude, and an ultimately good nature.<sup>13</sup> If these traits are not properly tempered, Wildair could easily become too lustful, too arrogant, or too threatening to be considered humorous.

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<sup>11</sup> George Farquhar. *The Comedies of Mr. George Farquhar: Love and a Bottle, Constant Couple: Or a Trip to the Jubilee, Sir Harry Wildair, Inconstant: Or, the Way to win Him, Twin-Rivals, Recruiting Officer, Beaux Strategem*. London: Printed for James Knapton in St. Paul’s Church-Yard, Ralph Smith and George Strahan in Cornhill, and Bernard Lintott between the two Temple-Gates in Fleet Street, 1707. 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, iv.

Sir Harry Wildair's loyalty, humility, bravery, and inimitable friendship are publicized before he sets foot upon the stage, allowing the audience to know that the man they are about to meet is worthy of their adoration. Although his first monologue details stories of whores and duels across the continent, he is understood as a comic foil to Captain Standard. His long-winded, dandy-esque speech about the woman who brought him to town is permeated with conversation of her physical attributes. Despite Standard and Vizard's constant queries for her name, Wildair instead preaches at length about the neck, breasts, feet, hands, and lips of his mysterious woman:

Her Name! Ay,--- she has the softest, whitest Hand that ever was made of Flesh and Blood, her Lips so balmy sweet... Then her Neck and Breast; --- her Breasts do so heave, so heave... Then her Shape, Colonel... Then her Eyes, Vizard!... Then if you must have it, she's call'd the Lady--- But then her Foot, Gentlemen, she dances to a Miracle!<sup>14</sup>

Despite fawning on the physical attributes of what we later learn to be Lady Lurewell, Wildair still begs his friend to help him locate "a pretty Mistriss [sic] by the by."<sup>15</sup> As the play progresses, we see Wildair perform various comedic actions that would normally be unfit for a woman to perform on stage: attempting to woo and have sex with the sixteen-year old Angelica, fending off a duel with Standard, flirting and kissing Lady Lurewell in her bedchambers, striking and throwing snuff into the eyes of Smuggler, and drinking Burgundy to the point of extreme drunkenness. The play ends with Wildair marrying Angelica in a flamboyantly outrageous wedding complete with dancing, singing, and a final poem (spoken by the newlywed Wildair) filled to the brim with the morals of the play.

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<sup>14</sup> Farquhar, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 7.

*Miss Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair*

Margaret “Peg” Woffington was born to humble beginnings in the Irish city of Dublin. Her exact year of birth is still debated; dates range from 1700 to 1720. I use the 1710 birth date here for various reasons. In her own letters she recalls her father briefly, meaning she must have been old enough to know him before his death in 1720. The 1710 birthdate would also put her at roughly ten years of age when she was discovered by French show-mistress, Madame Violante. The average age of Violante’s child stars was around ten, meaning they were old enough to perform well but young enough to still be energetic and innocent. If Peg had been any younger than ten, it is unlikely that her mother would have allowed her to leave home with an otherwise complete stranger. If she had been much older than ten, Madame Violante would have been less likely to adopt her into her youth troupe.

Young Peg’s father, a bricklayer, passed away in 1720 and her widowed mother took to washing clothes and running a small grocery shop. Peg and her younger sister Mary would hock the store’s wares in the Dublin streets to help lure customers into their family shop.<sup>16</sup> Hot on the heels of *The Beggar’s Opera*’s success in London, French show-mistress Madame Violante had come to Ireland in hopes of being the first to stage the popular show for Irish audiences and was on the lookout for young talent. Upon spotting the ten-year old Peg selling salads in the streets, Madame Violante knew that she had found her newest talent.<sup>17</sup> The show-mistress followed the bright young girl home

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<sup>16</sup> Marian Broderick. *Wild Irish Women: Extraordinary Lives from History*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 299.

<sup>17</sup> Daly, 10. This is corroborated by fellow biographer Willis J Abbot in his book (347-351). Alternatively, Lewis S. Benjamin (*Stage Favourites of the Eighteenth-century* (153)) and Barbara Marinacci (23) use the 1714 birthdate.

and approach her mother about a possible career change for the youthful Peg. Desperately in need of money and hopeful that Peg would find a better life under the tutelage of Madame Violante, Mrs. Woffington agreed to send her oldest daughter to work upon the stage.

Beginning her theatrical career in Violante's Lilliputians troupe, her first role was the female lead in Gay's opera. Playing the willful woman Polly Peachum, young Miss Woffington performed opposite the young Betty Barnes who was playing the male lead, Macheath, in travestie.<sup>18</sup> Recalling reviews from an issue of *European Magazine*, Daly explains that "little Peggy carried herself gracefully, was free from nervousness, and danced in such a sprightly manner that her cleverness was a general theme of talk among her audiences. Her bright and attractive face and the precocious intelligence displayed in her acting immediately gained for her a place in popularity that none of her young rivals could dispute."<sup>19</sup> A success in the role, it did not take long for Madame Violante to stretch Miss Woffington's talents. Despite beginning her career in the role of Polly, there are several London newspapers from 1732 that proclaimed another Violante production of *The Beggar's Opera*, with "The Part of Macheath by the celebrated Miss Woffington."<sup>20</sup> These bills are the first evidence of Miss Woffington's popularity in Ireland and the first notation of her playing a travestie role.

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<sup>18</sup> Marinacci, 24 and Benjamin, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Daly, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Dunbar. *Peg Woffington and Her World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968. 19. Although Dunbar's book relies heavily on impossible-to-verify narrative, this fact is corroborated in Daly's detailed addenda of all parts played by Miss Woffington (160-4) and in Felicity Nussbaum's *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-century British Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 191.

Madame Violante, an entrepreneurial manager, had unfortunately made some strong enemies in the Dublin theatre scene with her youthful children's troupe. The success of her youth *Beggar's Opera* had taken potential ticket sales from the larger theatre managers. Unhappy with this, the Lilliputians were soon shut down in spite of their great success, Dublin's theatre managers going out of their way to disband the troupe that was taking their audiences to the streets rather than to their own seats. With the termination of the Lilliputians, Madame Violante kept the youthful Miss Woffington with her, training her to speak properly, dress to fit her form, and carry herself gracefully; essentially molding her in Madame Violante's own entrepreneurial and theatrical image.<sup>21</sup> Madame Violante lived with the young Miss Woffington in a flat in Dublin, teaching her about the theatre industry and training her in the arts of management and performance.

It wasn't long until Madame Violante introduced Miss Woffington to the prosperous young actor turned theatre manager Thomas Elrington. Elrington, enamored by the teenage charms of Miss Woffington, hired her on the spot to sing and dance in the interludes between acts at the Aungier Street Theatre.<sup>22</sup> One fateful evening, shortly before the night's performance of *Hamlet*, the young actress contracted to play Ophelia fell ill, prompting Elrington to consider cancelling the sold-out show. Miss Woffington jumped at the chance and offered her services as a replacement. Elrington, afraid of losing an entire evening's pay, allowed the substitution. The show went on with Miss Woffington in the role, and the spritely Peg became an overnight success. As a result of

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<sup>21</sup> Marinacci, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 25.

her immediate acceptance by the Dublin audience, Elrington made the spirited actress a part of the theatre's regular company.<sup>23</sup>

Peg began to make a name for herself playing the breeches part of Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer*, a part she took over when the renowned Irish actress George Anne Bellamy left Ireland for London stardom. According to biographer Barbara Marinacci, Woffington's "interesting shape" and "intriguing mixture of swaggering man and bewitching girl" won the hearts of many who saw her at the Aungier Street Theatre Royal.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 1: Miss Woffington. Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

She began accumulating more breeches roles in her repertoire, adding Portia, Rosalind, and Hippolyta to her list of beloved breeched characters. With these successes in mind, she began to think about her next big career move. Knowing her proficiency in breeches and the undeniable box office draw in the spectacle of a shapely woman in pants, Peg made a bold step that would soon send her to London as a star, rivalling that of Miss Bellamy. Using her knowledge of the theatre, her growing celebrity status, and the right combination of business savvy and feminine sexuality, she convinced her company manager, Mr. Elrington, to grant her the part of Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar's hit, *The Constant Couple*.

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<sup>23</sup> Marinacci, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 36.

The role was originated by Robert Wilks, another young Irishman who transferred to London performing the role to much acclaim.<sup>25</sup> It was said that “no man would venture on Wildair for at least a generation, for fear of being unfavourably compared with the incomparable Wilks.”<sup>26</sup> Marinacci hypothesizes that the role had been avoided for years due to the fact that “no one dared to compete with Wilks’s still lingering reputation.”<sup>27</sup> In the preface for *The Constant Couple*, Farquhar specifically notes Wilks’s expertise in the role:

Mr. Wilks’s Performance has set him so far above Competition in the part of Wildair, that none can pretend to envy the Praise due to his Merit. That he made the Part, will appear from hence, that whenever the Stage has the Misfortune to lose him, Sir Harry Wildair may go to the Jubilee.<sup>28</sup>

No man dared to attempt the role during Wilks’s lifetime. And, after Wilks’s death in 1732, it was assumed by much of the English audience that *The Constant Couple* would never be performed again as no man could ever emulate his performance of the beloved charming rake.<sup>29</sup>

But Miss Woffington, bright and daring, decided to



Figure 2: Robert Wilks as Sir Harry Wildair. Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>25</sup> Marinacci, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Farquhar, iv.

<sup>29</sup> Dunbar, 37.



challenge that assumption; after all, she was a *woman* venturing to take on the role, not a man. Not even a decade after Wilks's death, *The Constant Couple* was revived at the Dublin Theatre Royal in 1738 with the young Miss Woffington performing the leading role of Sir Harry Wildair in travestie.<sup>30</sup> Aware of the novelty but afraid of the moral backlash, Elrington didn't over-publicize the event until the eve of opening night. Lucky for Elrington and for Miss Woffington, "from the moment of Peg's entrance, dashing and debonair, her figure set off to perfection by the close-fitting suit of satin and lace, the evening was a stunning success. Never had anyone looked so splendid on the stage."<sup>31</sup>

From the moment Miss Woffington entered the stage in breeches, performing the role of the beloved Sir Harry Wildair in travestie, she immediately caught the attention of audiences and critics in Ireland and England. Excited to see a favorite play brought back from the dead, audiences flocked to the theatre. Seeing the celebrated Miss Woffington in the lead role doubled the audience's enthusiasm. Many eighteenth-century sources even claimed Miss Woffington to be Wilks's equal in the role,



Figure 3: Miss Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair. Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

some going so far as to call her superior to her predecessor. Miss Woffington's performances of maleness were logged in various pamphlets and newspapers, even

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<sup>30</sup> She would reprise the role for the first time in London in 1740 at Covent Garden.

<sup>31</sup> Dunbar, 38.

earning her top billing (in the largest font type) on the playbills for *The Constant Couple*. Seeing the young and curvaceous actress performing the role of the comedic charming rake created a buzz, both positive and negative. She was vibrant and humorous in her delivery while simultaneously being seductive and alluring in her masculine state of undress.

Some authors, like fellow theatre artist and dramatic critic James Quinn, praised her work:

There was no woman that ever yet appeared upon the stage who could represent with such ease and elegance the character of a man. Everyone who remembers her must recollect that she performed Sir Harry Wildair... far superior to any actor of her time.<sup>32</sup>

And some stories lent themselves to more unsavory connotations:

According to a much-repeated and almost certainly apocryphal anecdote first mentioned by William Chetwood, after her performance as Wildair, Woffington allegedly exclaimed, '*In my conscience! I believe Half the Men in the House take me for one of their own Sex. Another actress reply'd, It may be so; but, in my Conscience! the other Half can convince them to the contrary!*'<sup>33</sup>

Comments like the one above drew on Miss Woffington's very public relationships out of the bounds of wedlock. Despite the comment's apocryphal nature, the tale has survived and is included in almost every biography of Miss Woffington. Although the rakish humor of the period could imply that the remark was meant as a simply witty comment, the barb is an unnecessarily harsh and uncalled for dig at her unnaturally masculine, sexual casualness. Miss Woffington was a mistress to many affluent gentlemen, much like the foppish and flirtatious character of Wildair that she performed to such acclaim.

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<sup>32</sup> James Quinn, *The Life of Mr. James Quinn, Comedian*. London: S. Bladon Press, 1766. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Felicity Nussbaum. *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-century British Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 218. Italics in original.

She may have been able to present herself as a man on stage but, as the jealous actress in the comment proclaims, Miss Woffington's true sex was known by the men in the audience through their own first-hand encounters with her.

Polarizing in its effects, witnessing Miss Woffington in the role of Sir Harry Wildair was great for the box office and even better for her career. She would perform the role of Wildair fifteen times at Covent Garden and thirteen times at Smock Alley between 1740 and 1755, as well as reprising bits of the role for numerous benefits and epilogues.<sup>34</sup> Due partially to her success in the role, many young actresses who came after Miss Woffington would attempt their first travestie roles as Sir Harry Wildair instead of the time-honored tradition of starting out with Captain Macheath. A comic character throughout the entirety of the piece, Wildair was delightful to watch and easy for audience members of both sexes to fall in love with.

Performing as Lady Lurewell on various occasions as well, Miss Woffington's ability to transform between the two protagonists enthralled her audiences. With the character of Wildair already being written as more fluidly sexed than any other man in the play, Miss Woffington was easily able to capitalize on her feminine wiles in conjunction with her powers of observation to create and perform maleness that pleased, entertained, and sometimes even unnerved audiences. Her travestie performances suggested that masculinity was a social construct, something as easily worn as a pair of

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<sup>34</sup> Nussbaum, 217. The benefit system of the period was the main source of financial income for actors and actresses. The sales from benefit performances would go directly to the person for whom the benefit was for. Wanting to make the most money at each of these benefits for themselves and for their colleagues, many actresses would promise to perform their monologues or scenes in breeches or as travestie to bring in larger crowds and, hence, more money.

trousers. Miss Woffington's successful travestie performance proved that performing maleness upon the stage did not require male genitalia.

Although Mr. Wilks before her performed with the swagger and confidence of a man performing a part, Miss Woffington's travestie of Sir Harry Wildair was untainted by male insecurity and inhibitions. Rather than simply being a charming male rake, she caricatured and performed the part of a charming male rake. Miss Woffington performed a heightened version of masculinity, envied and desired by men and women alike. Her audience wanted her and wanted to be her. Not only did she present a keen level of maleness due to her own observations of the men around her, but she also embodied the feminine shape and wiles desired by those same men. Similarly, she knew through her own experience what women most often desired in men and she used this knowledge in crafting her travestie performances.

The meta-knowledge of Miss Woffington's true sex beneath her trousers gave her permission to poke fun at both sexes while performing in travestie. With a swing of her hips and a flirtatious wink, she could make men and women alike want her, all while dressed as Sir Harry Wildair. Creating this open yearning for her physical form despite her theatrical male attire allowed her the space to point and wag her finger at the lustful follies of men in the audience while winking towards the women in a mutual joke about the shameless, base desires of their male counterparts. Miss Woffington's ambiguous androgyny let men and women equally enjoy her flirtations on the stage without ridicule or embarrassment. I claim that these flirtations are the precursor to the modern burlesque genre. Miss Woffington's point and wink, her coquettish and coy performances in what was considered a public state of undress in her breeches is reminiscent of the

contemporary burlesque performance tradition. She knew what her audience wanted and she teased them with it, much to their delight (and sometimes to their chagrin).

She appealed to both sexes in her travestie performances, moving, speaking, and acting in ways that lured both men and women into craving her theatrical embrace. As exemplified in the poem below, women wanted her, and men wanted to be her:

When first in Petticoats you trod the Stage,  
Our Sex with Love you fir'd, your own with Rage!  
In Breeches next, so well you play'd the Cheat,  
The pretty Fellow, and the Rake compleat--  
Each sex, were then, with different Passions mov'd,  
The Men grew envious, and the Women loved.<sup>35</sup>

Such a subversion of heteronormative gender responses has led many scholars to shoehorn the travestie performances of Miss Woffington into the realm of homosexual desire. Although there is much to unpack in such claims, I believe that poems like this are meant to showcase the ways in which gender was more fluidly understood on the eighteenth-century English stage. Rather than the hard lines of homosexuality and heterosexuality that have since become the norm in the Western world, sexuality was not quite so rigidly constructed in the eighteenth-century. Although sodomy was prohibited, homosexuality was not. The term did not even enter the vernacular until the late nineteenth century. This freedom of sexual understanding gave permission for women like Miss Woffington to flirt with the boundaries of normativity while asking her audience to think outside the socially prescribed boxes of traditional performances of masculinity and femininity.

As noted in the following poem, Miss Woffington's performances in skirts and in breeches made her an object of desire for both sexes:

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<sup>35</sup> Nussbaum, 76.

Her charm, resistless, conquers all—  
Both sexes vanquished lie,  
And who to Polly scorned to fall  
By Wildair, ravaged, die.<sup>36</sup>

Playing men and women with equal success, Miss Woffington was an androgynous body in public view, playing up the desires of all who saw her. She was irresistible, crafting her performances to please and tease. Although the eighteenth-century theatrical stage was fairly progressive in their performances of gender, there were very vocal members of society who felt such travestie performances were unnatural and immoral. Historian Kristina Straub quotes critic John Hill in 1755:

We see women sometimes act the parts of men, and in all but love we approve them. Mrs Woffington pleases in Sir Harry Wildair in every part, except where she makes love; but there no one of the audience ever saw her without disgust; it is insipid, or it is worse; it conveys no ideas at all, or very hateful ones; and either the insensibility, or the disgust we conceive quite break in upon the delusion... Nothing does but nature... the delusions must be kept up [and] nature only can do this.<sup>37</sup>

Specifically, the moments in which Wildair is meant to make love to Angelica and Lady Lurewell made some audience members very uncomfortable. Unlike all other moments in the play where Wildair describes his lusty adventures with various whores, the actual presentation of flirtation and love-making on stage drew the minds of some audience members back to the “unnaturalness” of the sexed bodies on stage. Theatre historian Helene M. Brooks explains, “the combined knowledge of the actress’s biological body, as well as the androgynous, rather than heterosexual masculine performance Woffington

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Findlater. *The Player Queens*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976. 79.

<sup>37</sup> Kristina Straub, “The Guilty Pleasures of Female Theatrical Cross-Dressing and the Autobiography of Charlotte Charke” in *Introducing Charlotte Charke: Actress, Author, Enigma*. Philip E. Baruth ed. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 114.

offered, made love-making scenes at best unintelligible, and as worst disgusting.”<sup>38</sup>

While audiences could laugh at the charming language-driven flirtations of Woffington’s Wildair, they could not always abide by the vigorous, drunken, physical trappings of love.

Unable to pass as a man on stage, Miss Woffington’s sex became a centerpiece of audience thought during such moments on stage. Although audiences knew the entire time that Sir Harry was actually a Lady Harry, the acute awareness of the actress’s sex at such pivotal comedic plot points shattered the audience’s suspension of belief in the theatre presented before them. They were taken out of the comedic moment, removed from the laughter and left to think instead on the physical limitations of the real actress rather than the physical implications of the imagined male character.

Instead of allowing such issues to ruin her performance (or the audience acceptance of her travestie role), Miss Woffington used a technique of pointing and winking at her audience during these heightened moments, soothing their anxieties and inviting them to laugh along with her at the ridiculous nature of such events. With a smile and a flash of her feminine legs, she would remind her audience that she, too, was fully aware that she was a woman. In other words, it was only the playful actress on stage who seemed to have forgotten Miss Woffington’s true self outside of her role. Climbing onto Angelica’s bed, Miss Woffington was able to point at the foolishness of men in love (or in lust). Rather than focusing all of her attention on Angelica and the scene in front of her, Miss Woffington capitalized on the metatheatricality of her point and wink, asking the audience to remember her fair sex and laugh at the frivolity of her performance while

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<sup>38</sup> Helene M. Brooks, *Actresses, Gender, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 78.

laughing with her at the ways women fall for flirtations and the reckless abandon of men when faced with a willing woman.

Instead of attempting to pass for male, I claim that Miss Woffington's comedic travestie performances (and those of her contemporaries) were instead performances of gender frivolity, bordering on the modern burlesque. Reminding the audience of her true sex beneath the trousers, she invited them to laugh at the comedy along with her. The point and wink soothed any anxieties the audience may have in watching a woman kiss another woman on stage by letting them know that the actresses involved are playing along with the frivolous charade and would never publicly attempt such actions in reality. The metatheatrical side conversation with the audience, a common tool in contemporary burlesque performances, allows the audience to remember that they are watching a show in a theatre with actors performing heightened and disparate versions of themselves, not real, sexualized moments to be embarrassed by.

Miss Woffington's travestie performances created a visual, sexual paradox that was both alluring and amusing. By performing a heightened representation of manhood on stage, she was able to simultaneously entertain and subvert any sexual attraction that either sex could have toward the character of Sir Harry Wildair. Performing in her breeches, she showed off her physical assets; flirting with the boundaries of public propriety by wearing pants as a costume but also as a state of undress. Her audience could enjoy her comic stylings and form-fitting costume while in the comfort and relative security of the playhouse. Miss Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair was both man and woman, playing to her all members of her audience with a burlesque point and a wink.



*She-Tragedy's Lustful Villain: Lothario*

The genre of the she-tragedy was also popular during the eighteenth-century and it would eventually develop into the melodramas that would dominate the nineteenth century stage. These plays highlighted the eighteenth-century desire to see morality and middle-class life on the stage. Unlike traditional classic tragedies, this genre focused on the lower and middle-classes, representing the lives of the audience members on stage. Focused on presenting moral dilemmas, she-tragedies and tragedies in general questioned the nature of men and women. Declamatory orations and heightened gesture were key parts of this genre. A subgenre of tragedy, she-tragedies were known for their focus on the sufferings of a woman, “sometimes innocent and virtuous, but often a woman who has committed some sort of sexual sin.”<sup>39</sup> Many of these plays were the first to focus on the lives and struggles of womanhood, creating more well-rounded and three-dimensional characters for actresses keen on flexing their acting muscles. Although some she-tragedies told stories of women who had lost their husbands or children, the more popular plays of the genre revolved around women who had lost their virginity in unfortunate ways, either by rape or by giving in to lustful desire before marriage.

These characters lived in the moral and ethical grey, making them much more interesting for actresses to play and much more relatable for their audience. These plays were incredibly influential to the careers of young actresses. Attempting to begin their careers while crafting their own brands, the female protagonists of eighteenth-century she-tragedies were popular roles for new actress debuts. Lovely and demure, penitent and heart-breaking, these plays contained women that easily helped to create an image of

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<sup>39</sup> J. Douglas Canfield. *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration and Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001.

ideal femininity to present to the public. And, as will be seen throughout this dissertation, audiences often had problems differentiating characters from their performers. If an actress successfully performed the tragic heroine of one of these plays, she was often quickly favored by the London audiences. Still fighting the age-old connections between actresses and prostitutes, a penitent character on stage translated to a penitent woman off stage.

The tragic male roles of these plays were equally stereotypical. Generally speaking, they were either love-sick young men who would die for their lover or lusty, villainous characters with whom the tragic heroine had had non-marital relations. Eighteenth-century playwright Nicholas Rowe was well known for his she-tragedies, and his play, *The Fair Penitent*, was a particular success. In this play, the illicit affair occurs between the gentlewoman Calista and lustful villain Lothario. Lothario recalls the evening of their illicit act with his friend Rossano:

LOTHARIO: ... I found the Fond, Believing, Love-sick Maid,/ Loose, unatir'd,  
warm, tender, full of Wishes;/ Fierceness and Pride, the Guardians of her  
Honour,/ Were charm'd to Rest, and Love alone was waking/ Within her rising  
Bosom all was calm... I snatch'd the glorious, golden Opportunity,/ And with  
prevailing, youthful Ardour prest [sic] her,/ Till with short Sighs, and murmuring  
Reluctance/ The yielding Fair One gave me perfect Happiness.

Without so much as a single moment of remorse for his actions, Lothario expresses that his desire for Calista was quenched in that night of passion. He recounts the days after the act, lamenting Calista's constant presence and calls for marriage: "Strait [sic] with Tears and Sighs,/ With swelling breasts, with Swooning, with Distraction,/ With all the Subtleties and pow'rful Arts/ Of willful Woman lab'ring for her purpose,/ Again she told

the same dull nauseous Tale.”<sup>40</sup> Claiming that their love would flourish better within the realm of master and mistress, Lothario leaves the heartbroken and remorseful Calista to her thoughts.

Despite his vocal opposition of marriage, the contrarian anti-hero longs to use his “Triumph o’er Calista”<sup>41</sup> to ruin the validity of her arranged engagement to Sir Altamont (Lothario’s long-time enemy). He continues to woo Calista from afar, doing his best to make their prior relationship public. Although his lines proclaim his disinterest in marrying Calista, his actions prove that he still has enough desire for her to wish that she belong to no other man but him. When his past with Calista is discovered by Altamont, Lothario does not hesitate in beginning a duel. After taking his hits, Lothario’s final words are still villainous in their tone:

My fierce ambitious Soul/ Declining droops, and all her Fires grow pale;/ Yet let not this Advantage swell thy Pride,/ I Conquer’d in my turn, in Love I Triumph’d:/ Those Joys are lodg’d beyond the reach of Fate;/ That sweet Revenge comes smiling to my Thoughts,/ Adorns my Fall, and cheers [sic] my Heart in dying.<sup>42</sup>

Altamont may have been victorious in his duel, but Lothario goes to his grave with smug satisfaction for his sexual wrongdoings. Heartbroken and ruined by this man, Calista’s tragedy spirals out of control with Lothario’s death.

The character of Lothario is the epitome of brash, overly masculinized bravado. His countenance and actions carry with them the machismo of the tragic lustful villain archetype. Characterized by his shameless virility, brazen language, and belligerent attitude, this archetype’s immorality stands in stark contrast to its comedic counterpart.

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent: A Tragedy*. 3rd ed. London: Printed for J. Tonson and fold by J. Brown at the Black Swan without Temple-Bar, 1718. 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Rowe, 48.

Although both characters are lustful and flirtatious, their motives, morals, and conquests set them apart. Lothario and Wildair are both scoundrels out to claim the hearts of women as their own. Wildair's motives for seeking women were simple pleasure and the fun of the chase. He only seeks the comforts of prostitutes and, once he realizes that his lust has tainted the bed of a virgin gentlewoman, he immediately removes himself from his old ways and settles in for married life.

Lothario claims Calista's heart and her virginity for more devilish designs. By deflowering Calista, he succeeds in cuckolding one of his greatest rivals. Unlike Wildair, he takes her virginity knowingly without any plans of marriage. The protagonist's ultimate foil, the tragic lustful villain is lascivious in nature, unremorseful for his wrongdoings, and vengeful in his actions. Even his spurned lover whose ruin lays in his hands calls him "Villain! Monster! Base Betrayer!"<sup>43</sup> Compared to the foppish, light-hearted charms of Sir Harry Wildair, acting Lothario required much more from the travestie performer and from the audience for the performance to be believed.

#### *Miss Woffington as Lothario*

While at Covent Garden, Miss Woffington made the acquaintance of a young David Garrick. Their relationship would heavily influence the rest of her career, for better and for worse. From Covent Garden to Drury Lane to Smock Alley, Garrick and Miss Woffington travelled together from theatre to theatre, playing opposite one another to the great delight of English audiences. In *The Recruiting Officer*, Peg played Sylvia to Garrick's Captain Plume; she portrayed Lady Anne to his Richard III, Ophelia to his

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<sup>43</sup> Rowe, 8.

Hamlet, and Cordelia to his Lear.<sup>44</sup> Lovers on the stage and off, Miss Woffington and Garrick eventually moved in together, but were never married.<sup>45</sup> Garrick's jealousy towards Miss Woffington's many gentleman suitors and Miss Woffington's own volatile temper spelled doom for their romantic relationship.<sup>46</sup>

After their fallout, Garrick travelled back to Ireland for a year to perform. When he returned to London, he brought with him two younger Irish actresses, Susanna Cibber and Hannah Pritchard. Miss Woffington was being replaced. Garrick, in charge of choosing the parts for company members, began putting Miss Woffington in smaller, lesser parts, substituting her larger roles with performances by the younger Cibber and Pritchard.<sup>47</sup> Already having rivals in fellow comedic actresses Kitty Clive and George Anne Bellamy and now having to compete with the even younger Cibber and Pritchard, Miss Woffington found herself losing out on many of the parts she would normally have been given, sometimes even roles she had herself originated.<sup>48</sup>

In an attempt to bring herself out of this rut, Miss Woffington chose to perform *Lothario* in 1757 as the last new part of her career on the stage.<sup>49</sup> The only other woman

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<sup>44</sup> Marinacci, 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 33. They were briefly engaged, but the marriage never occurred. According to stories of the period, Garrick got cold feet the day of the proposed wedding and, hurt by this, Miss Woffington called off the entire affair—effectively ending their relationship altogether.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix for the complete poem of "Pretty Peggy." This poem is often assumed to have been authored by one of Miss Woffington's more adamant suitors, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams. Some biographers claim that this poem was the final straw for Garrick's jealousy. Alternatively, Rowlands claims that the poem was actually written by a love-struck Garrick before even beginning the relationship with Miss Woffington, sometime shortly after her first appearance on the London stage as Sylvia in 1740 (41-2). Daly also highlights the fact that the author of the poem is unknown (though it was most likely penned by Hanbury Williams or Garrick). Unlike the many other biographers of Miss Woffington's life, Benjamin claims that the breakup of these two theatrical powerhouses was actually caused by Miss Woffington's jealousy over Garrick's flirtations with Austrian dancer, Eva Maria Violette—rather Garrick's jealousy of Miss Woffington's various suitors (178).

<sup>47</sup> Marinacci, 38-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Nussbaum, 223.

to attempt the role prior to this was the vagabond Mrs. Charlotte Charke (who will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). Mrs. Charke's performance of Lothario had been met with mixed reviews, but she was not nearly as successful in the public theatres as Miss Woffington. Knowing the popularity of her travestie performances and the shifting audience preferences for melodramatic tragedies, Miss Woffington hoped that the role of Lothario would be a defining moment for her waning career.

Unlike playing Wildair in the throes of her youth, Miss Woffington was almost forty years old when she first took on a tragic travestie part. Although she had made her illustrious career through performing comedies and tragedies in both breeches and petticoats, tragic travestie was new territory that she was unfortunately unable to translate successfully. Acclaimed for her ability to speak and act the sexualized gaiety of Wildair, Miss Woffington experienced a distinctly different reception when performing Lothario. Lothario, unlike Wildair, was never meant to be humorous. He was, instead, a source of immoral evil. An antagonist rather than a protagonist, Lothario's choice of word and action made him less of a hero and more of a villain; thus making her travestie less muse-like and more monstrous.

Theatre historian Helene M. Brooks claims the strongest difference between the two characters lies in the sexualized language of Sir Harry Wildair and Lothario. While Wildair's speeches of love and lust are hyperbolic and frivolous, Lothario's are "motivated not by pleasure but by vengeance."<sup>50</sup> He beds Calista with the intention of satiating his own lust and causing turmoil for his enemy (her fiancé, Altamont). Brooks goes on to note that "unlike Sir Harry's expansive, ebullient and most importantly

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<sup>50</sup> Brooks, 80.

unfulfilled (within the dramatic world of the play) sexual desires, Lothario's sexuality is powerful, aggressive, and dominates the play."<sup>51</sup> This, too, leads to a noticeably different audience reception to both the character and, in the case of travestie, the performer.

Lothario's aggression is felt in his language as well as his actions. He is a threat to the ecosystem of the play; the antagonist that breaks the natural order of the imagined society. Calista and Altamont's marriage makes sense in their world and Lothario exists to foil that plan. Wildair may have been charming, but Lothario was dangerous.

Unfortunately for travestie actresses including Miss Woffington, this heightened, overly masculine sexuality created many issues for women attempting to perform the role. The plot of such she-tragedies hinged on the biological sex of villain, and if the performer playing the role was not sexually threatening, then the tragedy of the play lost much of its effect. When Lothario recounts his one-night affair with Calista, there is no attempt at subtlety. His recollections are meant to shock the audience, reminding them that he is the antagonist of the play who leads to the moral downfall of the heroine, Calista. Lothario's sex permeates *The Fair Penitent*. His threatening machismo drapes Calista in darkness. Always aware of their sexual encounter and her enjoyment of the act itself, Lothario's manhood is constantly measured against that of Altamont. While such measuring could lead to amusing visual gags in a comic travestie role, there is no room for such jokes in this tragedy.

Different from the comedic fluff of Sir Harry Wildair, performing Lothario relied heavily on the words and actions of the character suiting the physical body of its performer. For Calista's tragedy to have any resonance, the audience must understand

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<sup>51</sup> Brooks, 80.

why she fell for Lothario's sexual tricks and why she still feels an attraction to him despite his evil intentions and actions. The audience must believe that illicit evening encounter between Calista and Lothario not only happened, but that it was sexually fulfilling. Without this belief, the audience feels no connection to Calista's pain and, therefore, no joy in her repentance. And for the she-tragedy genre to work, that connection must be felt.

Seeing Miss Woffington attempt to present herself on stage as Lothario created a sort of cognitive dissonance that was keenly felt by her audience. The visual story of Miss Woffington bedding and breaking the heart of Calista was not feasible to audiences. The sexual threat of Lothario is nullified by the less than threatening female body beneath the disguise. Rather than seeing Lothario preying on the tragic heroine, audiences saw a woman preying upon a fellow woman. The fear that should have been felt in that moment is transformed to confusion, humor, or worse, disgust. The performance was unbelievable and, therefore, Lothario lost his power and effectiveness as a villain. For a character like Lothario to be performed by a woman was, according to Felicity Nussbaum, to "unite the rake and his beautiful prey, the victimizer and the victim."<sup>52</sup> She claims that Woffington's Lothario "represented to English theatre-goers a retrograde masculinity," a backwards masculinity that was visually masculine but feminine in action that unnecessarily threatened the performative potential of the she-tragedy lead female role in the play.<sup>53</sup>

While this is one way of looking at it, I don't agree that the presentation of masculinity was particularly regressive. I prefer to think of it as performative. Miss

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<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum, 192.

<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum, 193.



Woffington's Lothario presented English theatre-goers with a performative masculinity that forced them to realize that gender and sex were not synonymous things; that gender could be worn like a costume and it needn't "match" the sex of the wearer. While the comic representation of masculinity in *The Constant Couple* was humorously subversive, the tragic representation of masculinity in *The Fair Penitent* was, like Lothario himself, dangerous bordering on monstrous. If the audience were to believe Miss Woffington's travestie performance of Lothario, they would have been forced to admit that gender and sex were not naturally linked, creating questions of public narratives of gender, sex, and sexuality within the eighteenth-century audience. Another possible option for the audience was to believe in Miss Woffington's sexual potency, which would have placed her squarely in between the worlds of male and female sex. As Halberstam explains, gender fluidity and gender ambiguity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was both a repulsive denial of the natural order of the genders and a uniquely attractive thrill.<sup>54</sup> To cross between the complicated boundaries of gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation was risky, especially for women of the period. Female masculinity was monstrous, it was unnatural, it was flawed, and it was unacceptable in most social paradigms of the period.

Although *The Fair Penitent* was noted in *The London Stage* as the seventh most frequently performed tragedy between 1747 and 1776, Miss Woffington's performance of the role in the 1757 season was only reprised once more for a benefit later that same year—hinting to the less-than-welcoming reception of her in the part.<sup>55</sup> Although some

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<sup>54</sup> Halberstam, 67

<sup>55</sup> Noted in Brooks, 161. *The Fair Penitent* was preceded in popularity by *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Mourning Bride*, *Macbeth*, and *The Orphan*. It also should be noted that Miss Woffington performed Lothario in Ireland prior to this in 1751. Her performance of the part in 1757 was the first time

critics praised her as “triumphant” in the role, one less-than-favorable memoirist claimed that Woffington’s performance as Lothario was “an absurd, an inconsistent and impotent Attempt” at the role, adding that she was “absolutely unfit” for the role and “play’d it with all the Impotence of mere Endeavour.”<sup>56</sup> This combination of comments with their very particular descriptors (“absurd,” “impotent,” “inconsistent”) seems to center on Miss Woffington’s lack of male genitalia rather than on her actual performance. Another critic writing for the London Evening Advertiser gave a more mixed review:

The interest which the heart naturally takes in the business of this play was weakened by the consciousness that a woman was playing the part; but we must say that Mrs. Woffington takes off her hat, draws her sword, fights, and dies with such an elegant gallantry that she becomes the prettiest fellow on the stage.<sup>57</sup>

Unable to separate her sex from her performance of maleness, one can only imagine this memoirist witnessing Miss Woffington’s travestie performance and chuckling childishly at Lothario’s stories of sexual conquest over Calista. For a female to publicly speak and perform the vile acts that Lothario imparts would have easily caused the more innocent members of the crowd to blush with embarrassment, fully aware that the part, though written for and as a man, was being presented by a woman. Despite her best efforts to perform such overly-masculinized maleness, Miss Woffington, a veritable queen of the travestie role, found herself unsuccessful in convincing the crowd of her masculinity.

I claim that this failure was due to the combination of travestie with contemporary tragedy.<sup>58</sup> The point and wink technique that made travestie work so well in comedies

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she played the role in London. Although her Irish debut received slightly better reviews than her London debut of the role, the part was still considered an ill match for Miss Woffington.

<sup>56</sup> Nussbaum, 224.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Daly, 106.

<sup>58</sup> Although actresses were successful in performing various Shakespeare roles in travestie in the nineteenth century, there are various reasons why this shift in audience acceptance could have occurred. One possibility is simply time—having seen more women performing travestie in the eighteenth-century,

was next to impossible to perform in tragic plays. Comedy allows actors to pass through the unspoken fourth wall, speaking directly to their audience and trading jokes back and forth. Tragedy hinges on the audience's full engagement in the reality of the story presented to them on stage. The fourth wall must remain intact. If an actor speaks directly to the audience, the audience becomes complicit in the actions on the stage. The point and wink that helped to make comic travestie so popular was impossible to perform within the world of tragedy.

As performance theorist Page DuBois asserts, tragedy is a communal experience that, when moved from the communal to the individual, loses its ability for catharsis.<sup>59</sup> The moment an audience member is removed from the play and reminded that they are only watching a play in a theatre, the power of the tragedy is diminished. "There is no welcome to the self," claims theorist George Steiner in his essay "Tragedy Reconsidered."<sup>60</sup> There is no place in tragedy for a singular person; tragedy relies on a community of people feeling emotions simultaneously. If even one member of that community is emotionally removed from the tragedy before them, the tragedy fails. The community must reach catharsis as a community; the moment a member of that community can no longer believe in the story presented before them is the same moment that others within the group probably feel a similar disconnect from the play. Similarly,

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it might have become more acceptable with the passage of time. Another possible reason is the connection to Shakespeare. Thanks in part to the work of David Garrick, Shakespeare was an incredibly well-respected and lauded playwright whose works were considered great works of art. In the nineteenth century, performing Shakespeare was connected with presenting an actor's artistic abilities. For a woman to perform a Shakespeare role in travestie was to present her acting skills by performing one of the great roles of the bard. The travestie took a backseat to the performance itself.

<sup>59</sup> Page Dubois. "Ancient Tragedy and the Metaphor of Katharsis." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1. Johns Hopkins University Press, March 2002. 22.

<sup>60</sup> George Steiner, "Tragedy, Reconsidered." *New Literary History*, Vol 35, No 1. Johns Hopkins University Press, Winter 2004. 3.

the audience must be able to believe in the truth of each character, living each moment in time with the actor on stage. In turn, the actor must be as truthful to their character as possible, leaving no room for the audience to question the verisimilitude of the character or the plot.

Although Lothario never hops in bed with Calista (as Sir Harry does with Angelica), Calista's plight is reliant on the audience believing that she could be seduced and bedded by Lothario. Her purity is tainted by her sexual relations with him, by allowing Lothario's genitalia to penetrate her own. The audience, aware that Lothario is secretly a woman in disguise, cannot believe in the intercourse of these two women and, thus, cannot believe in the dire situation that Calista is in. Calista's fears and turmoil become silly, Lothario becomes mischievous, and Altamont becomes the blind cuckolded husband-to-be—all characters to be found in a comedy, not a tragedy.

When Miss Woffington stepped on stage as Lothario, she was forced by the tragedy genre to make her performance of masculinity as genuinely believable as possible. For an acclaimed actress, this was an impossible task. Her face was instantly recognizable and her name was in the playbill after all. Audiences could not separate the actress from the part in the way that was necessary for the tragedy of *The Fair Penitent* to work. Any attempts to point and wink at the masquerade she was performing would have been inappropriate for the part. Unable to use the performance techniques that helped to make her travestie performances popular, Miss Woffington's performance of Lothario was a commercial and personal flop. Only her prior reputation seemed to save her from complete failure. Daly notes a few criticisms of her performance:

She tried her powers of acting a tragedy rake, for Lothario is certainly of that cast, whether she was as greatly accomplished in the manly tread of the buskined

libertine as she was in the gay walk of the sprightlier gentleman I know not, but it is certain she did not meet with the same approbation in the part of Lothario as in that of Wildair.<sup>61</sup>

Another critic from the *London Evening Advertiser* wrote of her performance that,

...the interest which the heart naturally takes in the business of this play was weakened by the consciousness that a woman was playing the part; but we must say that Mrs. Woffington takes off her hat, draws her sword, fights, and dies with such an elegant gallantry that she becomes the prettiest fellow on the stage.<sup>62</sup>

Loved as an actress of both comedy and tragedy, it seems as though it was difficult to criticize her performance of Lothario. It is almost as if the audience wanted to believe in the travestie but were unable to fully suspend their disbelief due to their prior knowledge of her sex counter to the character. Miss Woffington's reputation as a renowned travestie actress made it hard for her audience to reconcile her comprehensive failure in the role of Lothario.

Audiences enjoyed Miss Woffington's travesties but, unfortunately, her attempt at a tragic travestie died alongside Lothario. It wasn't long after this failure on stage that Miss Woffington's health and vigor began to decline. As Daly notes, "the early age at which she began her life in the theatre... the assiduity of her attention to duty, and the effort she had made for many years to preserve her station in an exacting social circle, and at the same time to maintain her position on the stage, had exhausted her."<sup>63</sup> While performing the breeches role of Rosalind later that spring, she fell ill, never to tread the boards again.<sup>64</sup> She lived out the rest of her life in a villa outside the city until her death three years later in the spring of 1760.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Daly, 105-6

<sup>62</sup> "The Dramatic Register, No. 16" in *Evening Advertiser*. London, March 1757. 26-9.

<sup>63</sup> Daly, 145.

<sup>64</sup> Abbot, 351.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 351.

### *Conclusions*

Although Miss Woffington was the first commercially successful celebrity travestie actresses of the eighteenth-century English stage, her reception in certain roles still floundered at times. The popularity of the Sentimental Comedy and She-Tragedy genres led her to discover that travestie performances (although progressive in their own way) were still best suited for comedy over tragedy. Comedy relied on ridiculously heightened characters while tragedy relied on relatable characters with heightened emotions. Travestie as a genre performance needed heightened characters in ridiculous situations or else the travestie began to falter. Furthermore, for a woman to present herself as sexually aggressive was still understood as silly and laughable, leading to her lack of success in tragic travestie parts. With only two travestie archetypes to perform, Miss Woffington was forced to recognize that even her talent was no match for the tricky roles of tragic travestie. She was believable as a man to a point, but the audience was always acutely aware of her true sex. In comedies, this added to the humor of seeing her in pants on stage. In tragedies, this awareness removed audience members from the tragedy presented on stage and led to the ultimate failure of the production.

It must also be noted that Miss Woffington's ability to perform travestie shows that the eighteenth-century audience was more open to non-normative behavior than may have originally been assumed. By allowing actresses to perform maleness on stage, audiences placed themselves in positions to visually defy socially prescribed gender standards. Despite such allowances, travestie actresses like Miss Woffington were always understood as actresses assuming male parts, pointing and winking to their audience to

invite them into the masquerade. They never passed as men on stage and I don't believe they ever truly wanted to. Travestie was a metatheatrical genre, making the audience's awareness of the travestie a part of the fun. Pointing and winking and laughing along with the actresses on stage, travestie was reliant on the comic repartee between the performer and her audience. Miss Woffington presented a performative masculinity that was created through hyperbolic representations of real men in society. She could make fun of both sexes while in her revealing pants, inviting them to desire her and then laugh with her along the way. Miss Woffington's travestie performances gained her popularity and stardom, but they relied on her ability to point and wink at the audience with a charming smile and a comic laugh.

CHAPTER THREE  
TRAVESTIE AND MYTHMAKING:  
CHARLOTTE CHARKE AND “MR. BROWN”

Tales of travestie actresses passing as men off stage surround the biographies and autobiographies of many eighteenth-century performers. Every account of Miss Woffington’s life includes a brief interlude detailing an encounter of hers while dressed in men’s clothes. While still working in Dublin, it is said that she fell in love with a young Irish gentleman. Upon learning that her beau was cheating on her with a young gentlewoman by the name of Miss Dallaway, her biographers claim that she created the persona of Mr. Adair and attempted to meet with the object of her lover’s newest affections. As one biographer claims, “She remembered her success as Sir Harry Wildair, and decided to make the acquaintance of Miss Dallaway in the attire of a young man of fashion.”<sup>1</sup> Each iteration of this encounter describes a lovestruck Miss Dallaway falling for Miss Woffington in disguise. Thanking her for imparting the truth of her adulterous lover, Miss Dallaway proclaims her wish that Mr. Adair was romantically available. The story always ends with Miss Woffington as Mr. Adair leaving Miss Dallaway behind, never letting her know that the young man who saved her from her unfaithful lover was never actually a man to begin with.

Miss Woffington’s mythical adventure as Mr. Adair is mentioned in too many places to not have at least some nugget of truth. It is likely that Miss Dallaway was real and that both women were the object of the same man’s affections. It is often claimed

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis S. Benjamin, *Stage Favourites of the Eighteenth-century*. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969. 163.



that Miss Woffington was so impressed with her abilities to perform as a man that she believed she was able to fool some of the more naïve members of her audience into believing her to be of the opposite sex. But the question lies in sorting the facts from the fictions and from sifting those facts through the sieve of hyperbole. How much can we actually trust of this story and how much is just that, merely a story? Furthermore, why do her biographers and historians include this story if there is so little evidence of its truth? Without verification, what myth of Miss Woffington is proliferated through recounting this anecdote?

Miss Woffington isn't the only actress to have such apocrypha written about them. In fact, it was fairly commonplace for specifically travestie actresses to have similar tales follow them into the pages of their memoirs. These stories were almost as intriguing and tantalizing for readers and gossipers as watching their travestie performances themselves. These stories were heavily influenced by the popular tales of cross-dressing women who came before them. Two examples of such women that I will return to later in this chapter are the lives and travestie performances of Joan of Arc (1413-1431) and Mary Hamilton (1746-?). Donning military armor and riding on horseback into battle, Joan of Arc's forays into pants gave her military and political power that would eventually betray her after her battles were won. Mary Hamilton, also known as Dr. Charles Hamilton, spent the majority of her life as a man; it wasn't until she married another woman unlawfully that her disguise was uncovered and she was forced to face the consequences of her gender subversion. The lives and travestie performances of these women are recorded in iconographic imagery, plays, self-published letters, and biographies.

Understanding the stories of these women as entrepreneurial building blocks for creating socially disseminated mythologies, I will turn in this chapter to the life, career, and male persona of one of Miss Woffington's contemporaries: Mrs. Charlotte Charke (1713-1760). I claim that Mrs. Charke used her public performances of travestie (both on stage and off stage as her self-created male character, Mr. Brown) as a tool for creating her own personal mythology. I assert that Mrs. Charke used the public memory of women like Joan of Arc and Mary Hamilton to craft her own image that would solidify her place in theatrical and gender history. Forgotten or overlooked by eighteenth-century biographers of the London public stage, Mrs. Charke left behind her own autobiography to remember her by. She created in her memoir a caricature of herself, leaving behind only the moments and images of herself that she wanted remembered by future generations. Part fact, part hyperbole, and part problematic memory, Mrs. Charke's narrative of her life situates herself as a modern myth—a life shrouded in gossip, widely-held beliefs, and folkloric potential.

*Mrs. Charlotte Charke: In Her Own Words*

Charlotte Charke has been historically identified as many things. Theatre historian Kristen Pullen collects just a few of these identifications in her own description of the famous actress, calling her a “prodigal daughter,” a “sentimental heroine,” a “passing woman,” a “consummate performer,” a “disorganised, impetuous Moll Flanders,” a “much maligned author,” a “half-crazy daughter,” a “madly eccentric” “scapegrace daughter” “of no note as an actress,” a “freak,” a “chimera,” a “potential lesbian,” and a

“proto-feminist.”<sup>2</sup> She wrote her own autobiography in 1755, titling it *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* and publishing it in installments before selling them as a collection. Within her narrative, she details the various stages of her life from her own memory; leaving behind a story of public travestie for the masses to consume. But, like memory itself, the narrative is a flawed representation of the facts of Mrs. Charke’s life; hyperbolized for dramatic effect, satirizing her father’s own autobiography and presenting only the information she wants her audience to know. Written with financial motives, her *Narrative* removes many negative accounts of her acting career, highlighting and possibly hyperbolizing the saucier details of her personal life instead. As Patricia Meyer Spacks explains, “The extreme incoherence of Charlotte Charke’s autobiography manifestly derives at least partly from the tension between the writer’s desire to share male prerogatives and her awareness that the only acceptable models for her sex involve self-deprecation and yielding.”<sup>3</sup> She is far from a trustworthy narrator and this is only furthered by her reputation as a travestie performer. Mrs. Charke lived a double life: one as the shunned daughter of the famed Colley Cibber, the other as the respected gentleman and actor Mr. Brown.

Born in 1713, the final child of musician and actress Katherine Shore Cibber and the actor and playwright Colley Cibber, Charlotte seems to have been a surprise from her first arrival.<sup>4</sup> Having been born almost a decade after her closest sibling, Charlotte was

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<sup>2</sup> Kristen Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*. Robert Rehder, ed. London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999. I am using primarily Rehder’s chronology at the opening of his edited version of Mrs. Charke’s autobiography as it is the most exhaustive and historically supported outline of Charke’s life.

likely to have been an unexpected addition to the Cibber household. Born into a theatrical family, her father was a well-known actor and playwright at the Drury Lane theatre and her brother, Theophilus, would follow in their father's footsteps, treading the boards of various London stages as well. Theophilus was her dearest sibling and although she speaks fondly of her sister Elizabeth and her mother, Mrs. Charke never seemed to have the strongest relationships with the majority of her family. According to theatre historian Kathryn Shevelow, Mrs. Charke's early life was characterized by her age separation from her older siblings.<sup>5</sup> Her mother was often ill and her father was often absent. Without many people around her to shape her ideas of gender representation, it is unsurprising that young Charlotte was unsure of how to perform with the expected decorum of her sex. With an aversion to sewing and wearing skirts, the youngest Cibber was much more comfortable emulating the lives and behaviors of her beloved brother and the various male playmates she had within the town.

The apocrypha of Mrs. Charke's life in breeches begins at an early age. Shevelow leans heavily on such anecdotes in her 2005 account of the life of Mrs. Charke. She explains that the independent and bold Charlotte Cibber enjoyed an education more befitting a young boy. Rather than sewing and practicing piano, she preferred to shoot guns, ride and dress horses, and work in the garden.<sup>6</sup> A vivacious child, Charlotte recounts in her *Narrative* her first memory of publicly wearing breeches. Donning her father's wig and her brother's waistcoat, a four-year old Charlotte left her home and walked into town, putting on her best performance of her father:

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Shevelow, *Charlotte: Being a True Account of an Actress's Flamboyant Adventures in Eighteenth-Century London's Wild and Wicked Theatrical World*. New York: Picador, 2005. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Shevelow, 35.

Having, even then, a passionate Fondness for a Perriwig, I crawl'd out of Bed one Summer's Morning... and, taking it into my small Pate, that by Dint of a Wig and Waistcoat, I should be the perfect Representative of my Sire... The Oddity of my Appearance soon assembled a Croud about me and I conciev'd their Risibility on this Occasion to be Marks of Approbation, and walk'd myself into a Fever, in the happy Thought of being taken for the 'Squire.'<sup>7</sup>

While the recollection of the story through the voice of Mrs. Charke is undoubtedly the most enjoyable to read, this same story is featured in all of her biographies along with a particularly adorable etching of the moment. The question lies in whether biographers have taken this anecdote only from Mrs. Charke's narrative or if there is some outstanding evidence of this moment that has been unfortunately left uncited for centuries. Did she purposefully craft this visually intriguing childhood moment to outlast her own memory in the monstrous breeches of manhood?



Figure 4: Young Charlotte Charke in her father's clothes. Courtesy of @Trustees of the British Museum.

I maintain that most of what we know about Mrs. Charke's life we only know through her own specifically crafted legacy. Her *Narrative* is the main source of information about her life and career, used by those who continue to write about her gender ambiguity in contemporary scholarship. She exists in both memoir and mythology, a representation of her own creation. A savvy business woman throughout her life, Mrs. Charke's autobiography was written with the financially powerful traits of

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<sup>7</sup> Charke, 10-11.

travestie in mind. Although her autobiography leaves out much of the salacious details on her travestie performances, her adventures in breeches are a large part of her narrative's public appeal. The piece opens with the following list of contents:

- I. An account of her birth, education, and mad pranks committed in her youth.
- II. Her coming on the stage; success there; and sundry theatrical anecdotes.
- III. Her marriage to Mr. Charke, and its consequences.
- IV. Her adventures in men's clothes, going by the name of Mr. Brown, and being beloved by a lady of great fortune, who intended to marry her.
- V. Her being gentleman to a certain peer.
- VI. Her commencing strolling player; with various and surprising vicissitudes of fortune, during nine years' peregrination.
- VII. Her turning pastry cook, &c. in Wales. With several extremely humorous and interesting occurrences.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these titles harkens to Mrs. Charke's unorthodox behaviors (much like the unorthodox undress of her many travestie performances); highlighting these subversive moments in her life to create her own mythology of self.

She uses the public interest in her travestie performances on and off stage to craft a brand of eccentricity and extremity, heightened by her relationship with the traditionalist Colley Cibber. Mrs. Charke spends an inordinate amount of time in her *Narrative* crafting her own image against that of her father, drawing connections between herself and her sire that began in the theatre and continued outside of it. I claim that her autobiography is, in itself, a performance of travestie; calling upon her father's own autobiographical apologia as a reference and guide for her narrative. Furthermore, Shevelow claims that "Publishing one's personal history without a religious justification... or a political one... was a new and controversial idea in eighteenth-century England. Many felt that there was something shameful about exposing one's life in print... For a woman to do so... was a public exposure more disreputable than acting, a

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<sup>8</sup> Charke, i.

kind of literary striptease.”<sup>9</sup> This literary striptease was Mrs. Charke’s way of presenting herself in full view of her audience, yet she was careful in only showing them her best side to leave behind the remnants she wanted her audience to remember. Most comfortable in her breeches, she was unafraid of undressing herself for her audience. From wearing her pants on and off stage to claiming and narrating her own life in the previously male-only mode of autobiographical writing, Mrs. Charke was as much her own muse as she was her own personal monster.

As she grew older and more independent, Mrs. Charke followed her father and brother to the bustling boards of the public English stage. Relying on her boyish looks and her brazen wit, Mrs. Charke’s earliest theatrical roles were often the bit parts of obstinate and humorous housemaids. Never thought of as leading lady material, Mrs. Charke’s early career seemed destined for the sidelines of theatrical history. But when management at The Drury Lane Theatre began to mistreat their actors and the troupe decided to strike, Mrs. Charke saw her chance for glory. With her brother Theophilus



Figure 5: Charlotte Charke. Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

leading the charge, Mrs. Charke grabbed her picket sign and made her presence known. Penning the play *The Art of Management; or, Tragedy Expell'd*, she wrote herself a large role ingratiating herself to the London audience and satirizing Charles Fleetwood and the

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<sup>9</sup> Shevelow, 348-349.

rest of The Drury Lane Theatre's management.<sup>10</sup> There are various stories of Mr. Fleetwood buying up all copies of the piece to keep the satire of himself from public circulation, but there are no substantial facts to support this claim. Historians do generally agree that Mrs. Charke would have had many problems getting work on the large theatre stages after her play was presented; no self-respecting theatre manager wanted to be the subject of another of her plays so they avoided working with her altogether.

It was during the Drury Lane strike that Mrs. Charke began her first forays into onstage travestie performance and theatrical management. One of her first travestie roles was actually written for her by her brother. She played the title role of Damon in the young Cibber's *Damon and Daphne* in 1733. Aware of her proficiency in travestie, it seems Theophilus knew how to use his sister's talents in breeches to bring more appeal to the box office for their striking company. Upon their defection from Drury Lane, Theophilus made sure to have his sister perform almost exclusively travestie roles during their first season at the Haymarket. In the New Haymarket's 1734 season alone, Mrs. Charke played the acrobatic Lord Flame in *Hurlothrumbo*, the rugged highwayman Captain Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, the swaggering soldier Pistol in *The Humours of Sir John Falstaff*, the false doctor Gregory in Fielding's *The Mock Doctor*, both Lovemore and Jack Stocks in *The Lottery*, Lord Townly in Colley Cibber's *The Provok'd Husband*, the scandalous thief George Barnwell in *The London Merchant*, the lustful villain Lothario in *The Fair Penitent*, Lord Heartly in another of Colley Cibber's plays, *The Nonjuror*, Rovewell in *The Contrivances* (a part originated by her estranged husband

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<sup>10</sup> First published in September, 1735, Mrs. Charke's first foray into playwrighting is a satirical attack on the Drury Lane Company theatre manager Charles Fleetwood, and a satire of art versus business in eighteenth-century English theatre.



Richard Charke), Sir John in the ballad opera, *The Devil to Pay*, the hot-headed Ramilie in *The Miser*, and the hearty Sir Charles Freeman in *The Beaux Strategem*. She played these men alongside a few sporadic instances of performing female roles, creating a name for herself among the London public as a principal travestie actress.<sup>11</sup>

For an actress to develop a repertoire of breeches and travestie roles was a tricky business that Mrs. Charke took perhaps a bit too lightly in her youth. Benjamin Victor, a theatre manager at the time, warned travestie actresses that “in the Name of all sober, discreet, sensible, Spectators,” if they should succeed, “you may be condemned as a Woman,” and if they did not, “you are injured as an Actress.”<sup>12</sup> Comic breeches parts were considered acceptable folly, but any woman’s choice to wear breeches longer than necessary was thought to be an “overstep [in] the Modesty of Nature.”<sup>13</sup> Charlotte, never one to limit herself within patriarchal boundaries, didn’t seem to mind the infamous reputation her cross-dressed undress brought upon her. At times it even seemed as though she relished her immodest nature as it was often seen in the public eye as a negative reflection back on her estranged father, Colley Cibber.

Although these performances sometimes came with mixed reviews, Mrs. Charke began to make a name for herself mostly through travestie performances mocking her brother and father. Her use of travestie was two-fold, she performed male characters as well as facsimiles of her family members (an act more closely connected with the contemporary definition of travestie meaning to mock or caricature). Stepping into the parts of Pistol and Lord Foppington in particular gave the public much to buzz about.

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<sup>11</sup> Charke, lvii.

<sup>12</sup> Shevelow, 186.

<sup>13</sup> Shevelow, 186.

Pistol was a swaggering and boisterous role which Theophilus was best known for, and Lord Foppington was written by Colley specifically for himself to play. Mrs. Charke's public performances of these male roles was a subversive act accentuated through her impersonations of her father and brother. She was born a lady, and a lady of decent standing at that. To publicly perform in pants, let alone to perform a condescending mockery of her own family members, was delightful to her audience and damning to her personal life.

In the cases of Pistol and Lord Foppington, these characters held within them many facets for Mrs. Charke to play with. They were both roles that exemplified the public personalities of her brother and father respectively. As historian Jean Marsden notes, "All three Cibbers (Colley, Theophilus, and Charlotte) were public, even notorious, figures, and all three chose to exploit their notoriety through the public revelation of their personal lives."<sup>14</sup> The Cibber family, disjointed and dysfunctional, was at the center of the theatrical landscape of the eighteenth-century. Charlotte Charke's travestie performances of her brother and father's signature roles only amplified their audience's curiosity and appetite for scandal. When Charlotte Charke stepped on the stage in either of these travestie roles, audiences not only experienced the humor and pleasure that normally came with such spectacle, but they were doubly delighted by the knowledge of her familial connections to those who were traditionally known to play each role.

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Marsden, "Charlotte Charke and the Cibbers: Private Life as Public Spectacle" in *Introducing Charlotte Charke: Actress, Author, Enigma*. Philip E. Baruth ed. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 65.

## *Performing Pistol*

Under the many restrictions of the Lord Chamberlain's Licensing Act, non-patent theatres were rarely given the chance to perform plays in their entirety. These limitations led to the creation of many abridged plays and new creations based on popular theatricals. *The Humours of Sir John Falstaff*, a mash-up of Falstaff's best moments surrounded by his merry band of friends, is one such piece. The beloved clown from Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 2*, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff had major box office appeal.



Figure 6: Theophilus Cibber as Pistol. Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Pistol, Falstaff's standard bearer, works as one of his comedic partners. Known for his volatile temper and bombastic speech, the similarities between the character of Pistol and the personality of Theophilus were undeniable to London audiences. Both notorious drunks, both nefarious rakes, and both braggadocious speakers, Pistol was Theophilus and Theophilus was Pistol. Theophilus's most famous portrait is of himself in full Pistol costume, legs spread wide, hands on hips, wearing a hat twice the size of his head.

It would have been nearly impossible for Mrs. Charke's travestie performance of Pistol to be understood as separate from an impersonation of her brother. Often the butt of the joke, Theophilus lived a life that mimicked Pistol's. "The least successful in his attempt to construct a public image," Marsden claims that Theophilus "squandered his

potential—and the good will that accompanied it—through arrogance and extravagant living. Spendthrift and profligate,” continues Marsden, “Theophilus became notorious as a wastrel and as an abusive husband who forced his wife into adultery.”<sup>15</sup> The story goes that he and his beloved actress wife, Susanna Cibber, had been forced to take in a wealthy tenant to pay their bills. With Theophilus’s abusive behavior, some historians claim that he forced Susanna to sleep with their tenant (William Sloper) in order to blackmail him. Gossip columns of the period claimed that the Cibbers and Mr. Sloper were involved in a scandalous *ménage a trois*. No matter the truth, Susanna Cibber did eventually run off with Mr. Sloper, leaving Theophilus behind to warm his own bed and pay his own debts. His very public trials over the entire affair garnered much amusement for London audiences. His attacks on the beloved Susanna Cibber were in vain and the payment he would receive for her cuckolding was a mockery in itself—he was awarded 500 of the 5,000 pounds he requested from the court.<sup>16</sup> Ever the foil to his father, Theophilus’s offstage persona rarely differed from the parts he played onstage.

When Mrs. Charke took to the stage in her brother’s costume, walking with his signature swagger and boldly speaking in his boastful tones, the comic character of Pistol took on new levels of humor, both as an entertaining travestie as well as a spot-on impersonation. Adding a touch of narrative to her history, Shevelow claims that Mrs. Charke “must have leered, grimaced, and strutted bow-legged around the stage in a burlesque of Theophilus likely to have been much appreciated by the audience.”

Shevelow claims further:

Their sibling relationship and the fact that she, his sister, was playing her brother as a travestie part, clad in an oversized tricorne hat and brandishing a large sword,

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<sup>15</sup> Marsden, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Shevelow, 271

made her performance particularly wicked. Theo was not very tolerant of mockery, but he took his sister's imitation of him without recorded complaint. Charlotte probably considered her mimicry to be a form of flattery, not unlike what Theophilus himself did when he played their father's former roles, although her performance supplied the extra comical (and potentially insulting) dimension of travestie.<sup>17</sup>

Despite a severe lack of historical evidence for many of these emotional claims, it would make sense (considering the tone of her *Narrative*) for Mrs. Charke's travestie machinations to have been perceived as playful prods toward her brother. In her *Narrative*, she recalls one of the many times she was asked to play a role that was associated with her beloved brother, saying "I believe the Town has had too many Proofs of my Brother's Merit, to suppose it possible for me to be vain enough to conceive I should eclipse it by my Performance, or that he was weak enough to fear it."<sup>18</sup> Such superfluous praise begs the reader to think of her relationship to her brother as an entirely positive one. Bound in love rather than laced with spiteful aping, it seems as though Mrs. Charke never meant harm in her travestie performances of her brother's characters. Instead, it seems as though Mrs. Charke was attempting to do something much larger in her performances of Pistol.

Performing the travestie of Pistol while simultaneously performing a travestie of Theophilus himself, Mrs. Charke upheld the public image of her brother and created a mythology of Theophilus *as* Pistol. Connecting the man with the character, her travestie performance grafted the character and the actor into one symbiotic being, making Theophilus less of a man and Pistol less of a character. Looking back to her only published play, *The Art of Management*, Mrs. Charke includes the character of Headpiece

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<sup>17</sup> Shevelow, 187.

<sup>18</sup> Charke, 256.

as a representation of Theophilus. Headpiece, the dedicated actor who leads a player's rebellion, is the brother to the heroine, Mrs. Tragic (played by Mrs. Charke). The end of the play restores Headpiece as the rightful manager of the theatre. Shevelow reads the ending as Mrs. Charke's attempt to "create for herself an imaginary Drury Lane where Theophilus reigns unchallenged" and she is held close by "a loving brother who cares for his sister as a father should."<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Charke's travestie can be understood as an attempt to give her brother's public reputation a clean start. Pistol may have been a bawdy and riotous character, but the audience loved him. By connecting Pistol and Theophilus in public memory through her travestie performances, Mrs. Charke was crafting an image of Theophilus made up of the lovable parts of his most famous character. Theophilus became a mythic representation of Pistol—or so that may have at least been Mrs. Charke's original intention.

Considering the mostly negative feelings of the London public towards Theophilus as a person (despite his potential on the stage), Mrs. Charke's travesties of Pistol (as well as some of Theophilus's other characters) could be understood as a sister mocking her brother in ways that the average audience member could not. The London audience enjoyed the scandal that Theophilus brought to the theatre and to the gossip columns, and the travestie performances of his youngest sister only added fuel to the fire. Although it might be assumed that Mrs. Charke's comedic travesties were intended to ingratiate the audience toward her hot-headed brother, most of her performances seem to be noted as strictly humorous attacks on the immorality of Colley Cibber's only son.

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<sup>19</sup> Shevelow, 209.

*The Politics of Paternity*

Although Mrs. Charke's performances of her brother were mostly met with approval from the London public (and from Theophilus himself), it was the travestie performances of her father that created social scandal. "Charke was most notorious for roles modeled on or taken from her father," claims historian Kristen Pullen. "The titillation, then, was more in watching the rebellious daughter mock her disapproving father rather than in playfully ambiguous sexual appeal."<sup>20</sup> Head of a theatrical family, popular playwright, Poet Laureate, and one of the most prominent actor/managers of his time, Colley Cibber was a tour de force in the London theatrical scene of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He carefully crafted an onstage and offstage persona that was fortified and memorialized through his own self-serving memoir, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian*.

The first autobiography of its kind written by an actor, Cibber's *Apology* quickly became a popular choice for reading. Unlike a twenty-first century apology, Cibber does not ask for his audience to forgive his flaws and public mistakes. He, instead, used the book as a means for garnering more approval of his many successes, doing his best to brush any of this failures under the proverbial rug. Using the autobiographical genre of the apology, he defends his personal beliefs and viewpoints through a discussion of his many career successes. Written with his greatest critic, Alexander Pope, in mind, Cibber's *Apology* is a direct answer to Pope's criticisms of Cibber's life and politics with a summary of Cibber's achievements, meanwhile describing theatrical history of the period in detail.

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<sup>20</sup> Pullen, 84.

Much like his son, Colley Cibber was not one to handle criticism well. Having earned his popularity and power in the theatre, he was not used to being questioned inappropriately. But unlike Theophilus, Colley Cibber did not take his youngest daughter's travestie performances lightly. There are many moments in Mrs. Charke's own *Narrative* that recall times when she wished her father had been more open to making amends for her performances. In one particularly striking moment of her memoir, Mrs. Charke details "one of the most tragical Occurrences of [her] Life": the episode wherein she sent a letter to her father asking for his forgiveness and he returned the letter inside a blank envelope, having not read a word of her letter at all.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Charke writes of her receipt of the unopened letter:

THE SHOCK OF RECEIVING MY OWN LETTER did not excite a sudden Gust of unwarrantable Passion, but prey'd upon my Heart with the slow and eating Fire of Distraction and Despair, 'till it ended in a Fever, which now remains upon my Spirits; and which, I fear, I shall find a difficult Task to overcome.<sup>22</sup>

The *Narrative* paints a picture of the unfortunate and repentant youngest daughter of a powerful man who was too prideful to forgive his own flesh and blood, despite her best efforts to reconcile. Unable to look past her mocking representations of himself upon the public stage, Colley Cibber never pardoned his daughter for making money off the audience's laughter at him. He knew of her popularity in his roles and, ever concerned with his own public reputation, Colley Cibber had no control over how the audience perceived him through his daughter's travestie representations. Much as Mrs. Charke may have attempted to ingratiate the audience to her brother through her performances of

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<sup>21</sup> Charke, 62-3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 63.



Pistol, it seems as though her father understood her travestie performances of himself as pure mockery with no redeeming intentions.

In what was perhaps her most notorious travestie performance, Mrs. Charke appeared at Lincoln's Inn Fields as Lord Foppington, the role most closely associated with her father.<sup>23</sup> Lord Foppington, a

supporting role in Cibber's *Love's Last Shift*, was known for his hyperbolic flirtations with all of the women he met and his lack of care for anyone or anything except his own fashionable appearance and charming witticisms. Written by Cibber to be performed by himself, Lord Foppington could easily be read as a heightened representation of the Poet Laureate. Although I am unsure as to whether Cibber was aware of this relation when writing



Figure 7: Colley Cibber as Lord Foppington. Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

the role, audiences loved watching him waft across the stage in full foppery. They laughed at the silliness of Lord Foppington's words and actions (whether the laughter was *with* Cibber or *at* Cibber is left to be determined). But when Mrs. Charke took up the fop's wig and began to parade across the stage in elaborate coat, tight trousers, and fashionable cane, I speculate that the audience was no longer laughing alongside Cibber (if they ever were to begin with). Instead, I claim that they were laughing with Mrs. Charke at her father, raising her popularity and dampening her father's reputation.

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<sup>23</sup> Pullen, 84.

While some audiences thoroughly enjoy Mrs. Charke's travestie rendition of the part, others (particularly friends and fans of Colley Cibber) pushed for her to return to skirts. A letter in the *Daily Advertiser* urged her to resume playing female characters so as to appear in "her proper Sphere"—a point that historian Felicity Nussbaum claims highlights how "Charke's equivocal sexuality offstage invaded her stage persona and became troublingly real" for some audience members.<sup>24</sup> Although I don't think I would make quite that leap in reasoning, I do believe that such criticism displays the politics involved in performing travestie, especially if the person for whom a male role is written is still alive and able to perform it. Lord Foppington, a creation by and for Colley Cibber, by all rights should have been performed by Cibber himself. But the rebels at Lincoln's Inn Fields knew that having his daughter perform the role would not only garner box office success as a travestie performance, but would also be a slap in the face to Cibber (who did not help the troupe when they were forced to abandon their original theatre by the terrible management of Drury Lane).

Mrs. Charke's travestie performance doubled as a mockery of Colley Cibber, pointing and laughing at his follies while pointing and winking at the travestie performance itself. Her travestie of Lord Foppington connected her father's public image with the idiocies and silliness of his character. Mrs. Charke's performance of Lord Foppington was twofold: She was the embodiment of her father and of Lord Foppington, conflating the signs of both the man and the character into one symbiotic understanding. Audiences had and still have a difficult time disconnecting the character from the actor. Seeing Mrs. Charke perform Lord Foppington was also seeing her perform Colley

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<sup>24</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-century British Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 196.

Cibber. Her travestie performances associated the three beings into a single, heightened representation. Charlotte Charke was Colley Cibber and Lord Foppington at once. Logic assumes that for her to be both simultaneously, Cibber and Foppington must also be linked.

Mrs. Charke's travestie performance was used as a tool to ridicule her father once again in 1736 when she joined Henry Fielding's company.<sup>25</sup> Fielding, a notorious critic of Colley Cibber, jumped at the chance to have Mrs. Charke play the role of Lord Place in his new satire *Pasquin*. Lord Place, being a rather unflatteringly caricature of her father, was another strategic travestie used to craft the myth of Colley Cibber against the character he created in his own autobiography.<sup>26</sup> Audiences had already connected Mrs. Charke's travestie performances with mockeries of her father, so casting her as Lord Place made Fielding's intentional connection of the character to Cibber impossible to miss. This particular performance put an immense amount of strain on her already tenuous relationship with her father, a fact that would come back to haunt her a year later. The Licensing Act of 1737 restricted all theatrical performances of full plays to the only two theatres with royal patents: Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

Mrs. Charke, a business savvy and entrepreneurial-minded actress, immediately set to work requesting a license from the Lord Chamberlain to continue performing. Knowing she would not be allowed to perform traditionally, she began making puppets to speak for her on stage. She received a license in 1738, allowing her to run a small puppet show outside the London city limits. In keeping with the restrictions of the license, she could not perform entire plays and she was not able to hire fellow actors to perform

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<sup>25</sup> Charke, lix.

<sup>26</sup> Pullen, 84.

alongside her. Her wandering puppet show could travel from city to city, but the small fees she was allowed to charge were not enough to support her.<sup>27</sup> It was roughly 1740 when Mrs. Charlotte Charke found herself thrown in debtor's prison. Without family to help her, she was forced to rely on members of her rather unorthodox circle of friends to rescue her from her goalers. It wasn't Mrs. Charke's first run-in with debtor's prison and it wouldn't be her last, but in this instance specifically she was bailed out by a particularly notorious friend. Elizabeth "Betty" Careless, a fellow actress who was perhaps better known for her off stage career as a prostitute of great renown, paid Mrs. Charke's debts and reunited her with her young daughter in the safety of Ms. Careless's own home. After regaining her freedom and returning to the streets of London, Mrs. Charke seemed to realize that her fame and name preceded her, making it rather difficult to earn money in any way other than on the stage that shunned her.

### *Introducing Mr. Brown*

Rather than attempt to move herself and her young daughter out of England, Mrs. Charke decided to use her travestie prowess to create a new persona to perform in her everyday life. Swapping her dirty petticoats for a dusty pair of breeches, Mrs. Charke donned the disguise of Mr. Brown. Unlike her previous travestie performances, Mr. Brown was not a male character written by a playwright to be performed on a stage within the confines of a play. Mr. Brown was self-created, performed outside the safe space of the theatre. He was not written for comic effect and he was certainly not created to be discovered. Instead, Mr. Brown was a persona created as a social disguise, a kind of

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<sup>27</sup> Charke, lx.

travestie performance different from those presented on the public English stage. He was a side of Mrs. Charke's own personality, a creation of her own psyche that worked as a representation of the masculine gender dynamics she fought with on a daily basis.

Whispers rushed from the lips of the public, breathing life into the myth of Mrs. Charke and Mr. Brown. She was him and he was her; Mrs. Charke was a monstrous chimera, an abstract representation of both genders. With the creation of Mr. Brown, she was recognized and remembered as both man and woman in one body.

Mrs. Charke created a life and persona for Mr. Brown. He was a gentleman of society, properly educated and strong-willed. He was unafraid to work for his keep and get his hands dirty. He was a strolling performer, proud of his performance abilities and happy to do what was needed for the good of the company. Her performance of Mr. Brown required donning a physical and vocal costume, disguising her body and her voice to resemble stereotypical ideals of manhood. She walked, talked, and performed a heightened masculinity, presenting herself to her public as the epitome of a general man of town. Behaving in a "very genteel Manner," she did her best to appear in public as "the well-bred Gentleman," performing the socially constructed tasks assigned with masculinity.<sup>28</sup>

She had been trained at an early age in many of the same subjects as young men, so she relied on her knowledge of gentility to perform her self-created role. I maintain that all of Mrs. Charke's prior stage performances of travestie were, in a way, rehearsals for the self-written role of Mr. Brown. After watching and impersonating her brother and father for most of her life, she was well acquainted with two different types of generic

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<sup>28</sup> Charke, 56.

masculinity: the brawling, boastful young man and the foppish older gentleman of good breeding. She was able to utilize these generalized images of masculinity to create her own persona.

Unlike her travestie performances on stage, much of Mr. Brown's reception hinged on Mrs. Charke's ability to pass as a man in polite society. Mrs. Charke's travestie provided her access to parts of society that were unavailable to her as a woman in skirts. In his conversations on Joan of Arc, Laurence Senelick claims that Joan of Arc donned breeches for a similar reason: her "insistence on dressing like a man... was in part to free her movements but chiefly to enable her to be taken seriously by her officers and men."<sup>29</sup> The physical freedoms of male garb makes complete sense in the case of Joan of Arc; the traditional clothing for women of the period consisted of long, dowdy skirts that dragged the ground, making quick movements and mounting/dismounting horses nearly impossible. As a woman in a literal battlefield of men, skirts were also much more dangerous in regard to the possibilities of rape. Skirts were much easier to lift and remove than the trappings of male military armor.

What interests me most is Senelick's argument that Joan of Arc was taken more seriously due to her breeches; a claim that connects her directly to the travestie performance of Mrs. Charke as Mr. Brown. Such an argument implies that there is a social and political power in wearing pants. Is it the trouser itself that holds within its fabric innate power? Or is the trouser just a signifier for masculinity? Assuming the first of these options to be correct, I wonder what it is about breeches that holds the mark of power? Trousers in both fifteenth-century France and eighteenth-century England were

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<sup>29</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2000. 166.

both fairly close-fitting, highlighting the long and muscled legs of men. And as far as a codpiece is concerned, very little was often left to the imagination.

Was it the ability to see the physical strength of one's legs that gave breeches their influence? Perhaps the ability to measure one man against his fellow companion through the strength of their legs gave breeches an assumed power; primarily through giving audiences an easy way to view the physical strength of the wearer. I assert that the pants themselves were not innately powerful but, instead, stood as a marker for masculinity; and masculinity is where the power lies. In the eighteenth-century, only men wore trousers; so trousers became an outward sign of gender.

Like a fashionable dress or a smart pair of shoes, men put on their gender every morning; breeches becoming an accepted signifier of masculinity. And when a person's physical sex is tied with their socially prescribed gender, it is hard to differentiate the two. When walking down any European street, it would be easy to determine the sex of the person strolling next to you simply by glancing at the apparel they wore. When women wore breeches, as was the case for Joan of Arc and Mrs. Charke, they threatened the "natural" orders of social and gender-based hierarchies. Women were subservient to men, and they were commodities to be given to and received by men. Although the view of women as patriarchal commodity for trading and social gain was changing by the eighteenth-century, men were still considered more powerful than women and trousers were a signifier of the male sex.

Yet, Senelick claims that "Joan [of Arc] never sought to pass as a man; indeed, her male garments did not conceal her sex, since her comely breasts are frequently

mentioned and appear prominently in the only contemporary likeness of her.”<sup>30</sup> Despite making a decent point, Senelick’s argument has two problems: almost all surviving iconography of Joan of Arc portrays her in either a dress or a skirt (not actually breeches), and the words he uses to make his argument are loosely veiled in toxic masculinity. Similar to iconography of Mrs. Charke, most of the artistic representations of both women showcase them in skirts. Were the artists misrepresenting the common garb worn by these women? Or was the artist less interested in preserving each woman as masculine “monstrous” versions of their own sex? Joan of Arc was known to be a woman who rode into battle in military raiment and so artists represented her as such. But how can we know how much truth is actually depicted in these paintings? What is the ratio of truth to imagination? In almost all artist representations of the Maid of Orleans, she is either dressed in a full, flowing gown or clothed in her plate mail and an armored skirt. The torso of her military suit flattens her chest so the only way to determine her sex is through her delicate features, long hair, and the skirt she wears. Some representations showcase a long, almost ethereal-looking skirt while others show her bare legs peering out from beneath a polished armored skirt.

Her feminine shape is accentuated by certain artists, but Senelick’s commentary on Joan of Arc’s “comely breasts” showcases much larger issues of toxic masculinity. While it is true that many writings from the period do mention her feminine figure, I maintain that they do so as a way of placing her back within the gender hierarchy. Her soft form is a marker of her femininity and the fragile vulnerability that is so often connected with that. Rather than allowing her to bridge the differences between the

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<sup>30</sup> Senelick, 166.



binary masculine and feminine genders, historians and artists did their best to place Joan of Arc within the visual realm of womanhood. Senelick, through his choice of words, continues this, placing her breasts at the forefront of his argument's reasoning. I claim that this is also the case for Mrs. Charke. If it wasn't for her own autobiography, we would have little to no information about her fantastical gender-defiant life on and off the eighteenth-century stage. She would, instead, be relegated to a footnote in Colley Cibber's *Apology*; the daughter not worth talking about due to her subversive and taboo behaviors. The images and historical mentioning of Mrs. Charke all place her in skirts with only mention to her life in breeches. It is almost as if she is being forced back into the box of her biological sex, erasing her rebellious gendered actions. She was a danger to the linked understandings of sex and gender.

For a woman to wear trousers meant that sex and gender were not necessarily linked. Ideas of gender partly relied on social signs of femininity and masculinity that could easily be donned by members of either sex. And if gender could be so easily subverted, then it was only a matter of time until the hierarchy of the sexes could be subverted, too. Giving a social and political power to pants marks Joan of Arc's donning of breeches as a simultaneous donning of masculine authority, threatening the hierarchy of gender that ruled the fifteenth century. She was a female monstrosity, subverting all known gender signifiers tied to fashion. And when Mrs. Charke decided to reimagine herself as Mr. Brown, she relied on the myth of Joan of Arc to help construct her own disguise. Like Joan of Arc, Mrs. Charke's secondary identity as Mr. Brown was originally only known by her family and closest friends. Although her best companions remained fond of her choice, her family had a distinctly different opinion. "My being in

Breeches was alleged to me as a very great Error,” Mrs. Charke recalls.<sup>31</sup> Her family members were worried that Charlotte’s non-conforming gender performances would mar the honor and reputation of the family, calling her a “disgrace” and her actions “injustifiable.”<sup>32</sup>

Just as her family feared for their own self-serving reasons, Mrs. Charke ran the risk of her disguise being discovered by the wrong people at the wrong time. Luckily, her performance of masculinity was strong enough (due to her years of practice in travestie roles on the public stage) that she was able to keep Mr. Brown’s true identity a secret when it was most important. In fact, there are various (possibly apocryphal) accounts of those who were satisfactorily fooled by her disguise. Using the mythic life of Mary Hamilton as cultural reference, Mrs. Charke took her history as a travestie performer and used it in her everyday life.

### *Female Husbands and the Myth of Masculinity*

According to Mrs. Charke’s autobiography, this choice to perform maleness despite being a woman caused her many trials. Having no doubt heard the story of Mary Hamilton in the local newspapers, Mrs. Charke was well aware of the dangers of her male persona. Putting on the breeches and apprenticing as a quack doctor, Mary Hamilton created the character of Dr. Charles at fourteen when she stole her brother’s clothes and first began to dress and perform maleness publicly. As cultural historian Terry Castle describes in his recounting of Hamilton’s life, she apprenticed with two doctors and became a travelling physician in her own right (another career that prohibited

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<sup>31</sup> Charke, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 73.

women among their ranks), all while keeping her travestie undiscovered.<sup>33</sup> Setting up a medical practice of her own in 1746, Hamilton met a young gentlewoman by the name of Mary Price. Having fallen in love with Hamilton, the young couple were married in that same year.<sup>34</sup> After living and travelling together for two months, Mary Hamilton's true sex was discovered by her partner, who immediately went to the authorities. According to Mary Price's deposition, she claimed that Hamilton had "entered her body several times, which made this examinant believe, at first, that the said Hamilton was a real man, but soon had reason to judge that the said Hamilton was not a man, but a woman."<sup>35</sup>

Hamilton's travestie performance was so convincing that the verdict of her trial shows even the jury's hesitance in naming her sex:

The he or she prisoner at the bar is an uncommon, notorious cheat, and we, the Court, do sentence her, or him, whichever he or she may be, to be imprisoned six months, and during that time to be whipped in the towns of Taunton, Glastonbury, Wells, and Shepton Mallet...<sup>36</sup>

Mary Hamilton, like Mrs. Charke, had created an image of herself as Dr.

Hamilton that was difficult for her audience to disassociate. She was both woman and man in one body, monstrously abnormal. Like Mrs. Charke's travestie of Mr. Brown, Mary Hamilton's disguise threatened the natural order of the sexes. By successfully living her life as a man for so long, Hamilton proved that women were capable of doing the same things as men. The fact that she lived so much of her life as a man without being

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<sup>33</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin. *The Newgate Calendar: Comprising Interesting Memoirs of the Most Notorious Characters Who Have Been Convicted of Outrages on the Laws of England Since the Commencement of the Eighteenth-century with Occasional Anecdotes and Observations, Speeches, Confessions, and Last Exclamations of Sufferers*. London: J. Robins and Co., 1825. 5-6.

discovered begs questions pertaining to masculinity and sexuality as social and political constructs (rather than innately born). As Lesley Ferris explains, “Mary Hamilton disguised as a man poses a threat to the patriarchal confederacy, because through her theatrical charade, her daring and flamboyant use of costume, she reveals gender to be social construction.”<sup>37</sup> Hamilton’s vagrancy (the crime she was eventually charged with<sup>38</sup>) is considered suspect. Her decision to perform offstage travestie seemed to spur from a place of internal gender identity counter to her sex and, instead of falsely performing femininity her entire life as a woman she chose to perform her internal male identity in an outward way within the public sphere. To challenge the eighteenth-century systems of gender in this way was to disobey all political, cultural, and social constructions, revealing a subjective nature to gender that undermined the cornerstones of gendered logic of the time.

Her travestie of Dr. Charles Hamilton was so convincing that it disturbed and titillated audiences across England and the newly-founded colonies. Her dishonest marriage and her subsequent trial were common public knowledge. When Mrs. Charke began presenting herself as Mr. Brown, it put a target on her back that not only threatened her own social status, but also the reputation of her entire family. For her family to be safe, Mrs. Charke had to successfully pass as Mr. Brown. But when she was too successful in her travestie performance, Mrs. Charke also found herself in difficult situations similar to the affections of Mary Price for Mary Hamilton.

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<sup>37</sup> Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. New York: New York University Press, 1989. 159.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

Although she never went as far as Mary Hamilton as to unlawfully marry someone of her own sex, Mrs. Charke did become the object of a young orphan heiress's affections. She recalls in detail her encounter with the young woman, mourning the heiress's faulty affections and her own inability to lie to the young woman to gain access to her immense wealth. "I might have been at once possessed of the Lady, and forty thousand Pounds in the Bank of England: Besides Effects in the Indies, that were worth about twenty Thousand more" she explains. "This was a most horrible Disappointment on both Sides; the Lady of the Husband, and I of the Money; which would have been thought an excellent Remedy for Ills, by those less surrounded with Misery than I was."<sup>39</sup> Much like Olivia's mistakenly improper love for Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Mrs. Charke was forced to come clean with the young heiress. After divulging her true sex and lineage, she recalls how the young woman did not believe her at first. Mrs. Charke's performance of Mr. Brown was so convincing that the young woman refused to believe her.

Mrs. Charke recalls of the moment:

Notwithstanding all my Arguments, she was hard to be brought into a Belief of what I told her; and conceived that I had taken a Dislike to her... I assured her of the contrary, and that I was sorry for us both, that Providence had not ordained me to be the happy Person she designed me; that I was much obliged for the Honour she conferr'd on me, and sincerely grieved it was not in my Power to make a suitable Return.<sup>40</sup>

Mrs. Charke's disguise was, in this case at least, foolproof. There are other similar stories (for they are all stories with little-to-no credible citations) of Mrs. Charke's camouflaged success under the disguise of Mr. Brown. It was much easier to find work as a man than

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<sup>39</sup> Charke, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 59

as Mrs. Charke, the failed stage actress. Dressed as Mr. Brown, she worked as a tavern waiter, a strolling player, a pastry chef, and a valet, among many other short-lived professions that usually prohibited women among their ranks (she briefly owned a grocery store and dabbled in butchery).<sup>41</sup> Historian Kristen Pullen explains another possible bonus to her travestie: “If she wanted to avoid creditors looking for Charlotte Charke, her alter ego Mr. Brown provided an easy disguise.”<sup>42</sup> For a woman who had already seen the inside of debtors prison, it was no wonder that Mrs. Charke might use this new disguise to keep her creditors at bay.

Mrs. Charke performed her role of Mr. Brown with much more success than her stage career. Deciding to take her debts into her own hands, she continued to perform in the summer months under her own name. She created a new troupe, The Mad Company, almost always assigning herself a breeches or travestie role of import.<sup>43</sup> According to both *The Daily Advertiser* and *The Daily Journal*, the fledgling troupe was announced for the first time through an explosive add with the eccentric hand of Mrs. Charke behind the pen:

A mad Company of Comedians having lately taken the Hay-market Theatre, propose to convert it into a Mad-house, and humbly hope the Town will be as mad as themselves, and come frequently to see their mad Performances, which will be madly exhibited, two or three Times a week, during the Summer Season... We hear that the Mad Company at the Haymarket design to keep up that Character, by performing the *Beggar's Opera* in Roman Dress, and exhibiting *Hurlothrumbo*, in which Mrs. Charke attempts the Character of Lord Flame.<sup>44</sup>

The company was an extension of Mrs. Charke's own public image; she presented herself as the mad woman clad in breeches, more comfortable smoking a cigar than dancing a

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<sup>41</sup> Pullen, 87.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Shevelow, 183.

<sup>44</sup> As quoted in Shevelow, 184.

proper waltz. The Mad Company showcased her talents as a travestie actress and provided Mrs. Charke with an outlet for her creative energies and a public rehearsal space for her own off stage travestie performances. Performing travestie within and without the public eye, Mrs. Charke slowly began to transition her life from solely Charlotte into the double-life of Mrs. Charke and Mr. Brown.

Eventually joining Linnet's strolling troupe from 1746-1749, Mrs. Charke seems to have fully transitioned to the name of Charles Brown, suspending Mrs. Charke almost entirely.<sup>45</sup> Gainfully employed as Mr. Brown, she was able to better support herself and her daughter financially. As a single mother, her options were slim for financial help. Many single mothers fell prey to prostitution to pay their bills and she certainly could not rely on the generosity of her family to support her or her young daughter. But Mrs. Charke was resourceful and fully aware of her shortcomings. Rather than attempting to make a life for herself as the displaced daughter of a Poet Laureate, I claim that she knew she needed to make a new place for herself in the world. And if she was going to start over, she was going to do it with the most advantages possible.

Being a man made it easier to overcome many of the social and financial obstacles that faced the dejected Charlotte Charke. She claims in her *Narrative*:

...the original Motive [for Mr. Brown] proceeded from a particular Cause; and I rather chuse to undergo the worst Imputation that can be laid on me on that Account, than unravel the Secret, which is an Appendix to one I am bound, as I before hinted, by all the Vows of Truth and Honour and everlastingly to conceal.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Shevelow, 324/Charke, lxiii. It is claimed that Charlotte Charke remarried in 1746 to John Sacheverell (she is billed as Mrs Sacheverell, late Mrs Charke" for two months of performances in 1746). It is unknown as to whether or not they actually married or if she just took his name in an attempt to save her name from ruin after the discovery of her offstage travestie performances of Mr. Brown.

<sup>46</sup> Charke, 73.

Leaving her motives a mystery leaves her at the mercy of her readers. This proclamation comes fairly early in her *Narrative*, possibly provoking her readers into thinking she may give away hints to her motives if they were to keep reading (and, therefore, buying her short chapters as they appeared). Unfortunately for her readers, Mrs. Charke stays true to her word. Throughout the rest of her autobiography, she only describes moments of her cross-dressed adventures, never giving hints as to why she transitioned from Mrs. Charke to Mr. Brown later in her life. I assert that while Mr. Brown may have started as a disguise of necessity, he became, for a time, a personal refuge. As Mrs. Charke, she was hounded by creditors and the reputations of her family. As Mr. Brown, her possibilities were endless.

Additionally, Mrs. Charke first introduces the actress known as Mrs. Brown to her *Narrative* shortly after her joining of Linnet's strolling troupe. Mrs. Brown, an actress in the troupe, became her closest friend and, according to some theatre historians, possibly her lover. After nursing Mrs. Charke through sickness during their time together in Linnet's troupe, Mrs. Brown's "Humanity" and "Superfluity of good Nature" created a bond between the two women that would last through the remainder of their lives. Possibly similar in their affections as the original love between Mary Hamilton and Mary Price prior to the discovery of Hamilton's sex, the two women shared the surname of Brown during all their travels together.

Though they never married and their fellow actors knew that they were two women, many of the outsiders they met in their travels assumed them to be a happily married couple.<sup>47</sup> They performed the socially understood gender roles of the masculine

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<sup>47</sup> Shevelow, 325.



husband and the feminine wife. Mrs. Charke's boyish frame coupled with her proclivity for pants made it difficult for various passersby to even notice that her gendered performance of masculinity did not match with her biological sex. And since Mrs. Brown and the rest of the troupe did not act like there was anything wrong with Mr. Brown, there was no reason for their audience to question it.

As Shevelow describes, "Charlotte played a masculine role to Mrs. Brown's feminine one."<sup>48</sup> Mrs. Brown often attempted to talk Mrs. Charke out of her reckless schemes but would eventually remember her place in the relationship and give in to Mrs. Charke's relentlessly optimistic ideas. Mrs. Charke wore the pants in their relationship, both literally and figuratively. She handled their finances, decided their next business ventures, and was responsible for arguing their acting contracts. Having grown used to the power of her breeches, Mrs. Charke seems to have transitioned to Mr. Brown in more than just name during this period in her life. She donned the physical signifiers of manhood as well as the mental and emotional stereotypes of masculinity. Dominant and daring, Mrs. Charke/Mr. Brown was in charge of their stocks, finances, and belongings while Mrs. Brown cared for Kitty (Mrs. Charke's/Mr. Brown's daughter) and kept their linens properly sewn. Sharing their living quarters, Charke, Brown, and Kitty presented the image of a wholesome strolling family of actors. Such an image is only solidified through Mrs. Charke's *Narrative*, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between herself and Mrs. Brown and their mutual love for Kitty.

Mrs. Charke's relationship with Mrs. Brown and her decision to keep her motive for creating Mr. Brown secret has been often linked to a clandestine homosexuality, but I

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<sup>48</sup> Shevelow, 326.

want to trouble that simplistic hypothesis. While I do believe that she may have been either a lesbian or perhaps even trans individual, Mrs. Charke's writings turn away from mentioning any sexual feelings toward her estranged husband nor for Mrs. Brown. While she does write affectionately of her female companion, the myth she attempts to create does not align with a sexual relationship between the pair. Instead, Mrs. Charke's autobiography points more directly to her relationship with her own identity as Mr. Brown and a personal revelation that came with wearing her disguise: a revelation of freedom that came with being someone else in her everyday life rather than just playing a part on the stage. "She insist[ed]," claims Felicity Nussbaum, "that the real-life roles for women extended far beyond those of the chambermaids, penitent prostitutes, distressed mothers, and tragic queens dominating the stage at mid-century, and she imitated in life her travestie roles as Lord Foppington, Captain Macheath, Lord Townly, Sir John, and Lothario."<sup>49</sup> But Mr. Brown was more than a part to play, he was a part of her gender identity that existed counter to the prescribed gender roles of the period. To perform Mr. Brown was to perform the hidden parts of herself. Mr. Brown became the myth of Charlotte Charke in the same way that Charlotte Charke is the myth of Mr. Brown. Their identities entangled to create a whole person—a person that did not live inside the boundaries of tradition.

While this may be partially true, I want to complicate Nussbaum's choice in terminology. While performing Mr. Brown, she was, indeed, performing a travestie role of sorts. But I assert that by presenting herself as both Mr. Brown and Mrs. Charke at various points, she was making her life into a breeches role. She was still Charlotte

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<sup>49</sup> Nussbaum, 114.

Charke underneath the trousers and she would sometimes return to her skirts as it seemed most fitting. But she was presenting herself in this new costumed character for her audience on a daily basis, attempting to fool them in the same way Viola fooled Duke Orsino, Olivia, and the rest. To admit that she just genuinely liked performing manhood was to admit that there were real social differences between the lives of men and women that made their lives easier in some ways. Kristen Pullen claims that “Making her own way in the world also suggests that Charke wanted the power and privilege of being a man.”<sup>50</sup> Such power and privilege was rarely possible for a woman, let alone a woman whose father was so publicly known. By performing Mr. Brown, she was able to subvert the socially prescribed binary powers given to masculinity and femininity. Disconnecting gender from sex, Mrs. Charke’s travestie made a mockery of eighteenth-century ideas of normative sex/gender relations.

### *Conclusions*

Mrs. Charke only graced the London stage a few times after her creation of Mr. Brown. She was allowed two benefit performances, each one presented after the death of her father and given to her out of what I assume must have been the pity of Colley Cibber’s fellow managers and the fond memories of older actors. It is presumed by most of her biographers that Mrs. Charke lived out much of the rest of her life as Mr. Brown, with Mrs. Brown living by her side. Though she would consistently code-switch between her two personas, it is generally agreed that Mrs. Charke returned to her skirts only when necessary. Much like the mythic representations of Joan of Arc and Mary Hamilton, Mrs.

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<sup>50</sup> Pullen, 88.

Charke was unable to keep Mr. Brown a secret once her father died. Although rumors of her double life as a man had persisted for much of her life, she publicly admitted the truth for the first time in her *Narrative*. Already rejected by her father and, therefore, much of the London theatre world, Mrs. Charke's performances of Mr. Brown became grotesquery, interesting to the gossip columns and reviled by the public. Her masquerades as Mr. Brown were misunderstood by the public, having never seen such performances without threat of social outcry. The only reason she was not completely shunned from society was due to her popular travestie performances and to her blood ties to Colley Cibber. To connect her to the Poet Laureate was conversational gold, and Mrs. Charke knew it.

Colley Cibber publicly announced the drafting of his will in 1754. Mrs. Charke, poverty-stricken and living in humble quarters with Mrs. Brown, began publishing installments of her infamous *Narrative* a year later. Just as she had mimicked her father in performance, her autobiography mimicked her father's own self-narrations. Beginning her book as an actual apology for her various improper adventures in breeches (unlike the *Apology* of her father that was more defensive than apologetic), Mrs. Charke's story asks her audience to forgive her for her past. She does her best to explain away her follies in life, highlighting a love for her father and her remorse for all of her improper actions. Tugging on the heartstrings of her public, Mrs. Charke used her *Narrative* to cry out for the mercy and forgiveness of her estranged family, all while continuing to titillate her audience with stories of her life as Mr. Brown.

Upon her father's death in 1757, Mrs. Charke and her sister Elizabeth received "5 pounds and no more" from their disaffected, deceased father's will.<sup>51</sup> Theophilus, the only sibling Mrs. Charke was ever really close with, died in a tempest in 1758 while travelling from London to Ireland. In that same year, her beloved daughter, Kitty, moved to the United States with her new actor husband to pursue their theatrical dreams abroad.<sup>52</sup> Without any close blood kin to turn to in her financial destitution, she performed one last time in 1759 for her own benefit at the New Haymarket Theatre.<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Charke turned forty-seven in early 1760 and she fell ill later that spring. Mrs. Brown, ever-faithful to her, stayed by her bedside throughout her illness. Mrs. Charke would die in her lodgings in the middle of April in that same year.<sup>54</sup> Always connected to her estranged father in life and in death, Mrs. Charlotte Charke's obituary reads as follows: "A few Days since died at her Lodgings in the Haymarket, the celebrated Mrs. Charlotte Charke, Daughter of the late Colley Cibber, Esq., Poet Laureat; a Gentlewoman remarkable for her Adventures and Misfortunes."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Charke lxiv.

<sup>52</sup> Shevelow, 368-9.

<sup>53</sup> Charke, lxv.

<sup>54</sup> Shevelow, 375.

<sup>55</sup> Shevelow, 376. This was printed in *The London Evening-Post*, April 17-19, 1760; *The London Chronicle*, April 17-19, 1760; and *The Public Ledger*, April 18, 1760.

CHAPTER FOUR  
DISPLAYING AND DISPLACING THE FEMALE BODY:  
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF DORA JORDAN

When speaking of travestie performance, it would be remiss to exclude the obvious visual effects of a woman's body in men's trousers, especially during a century when proper women only wore skirts and petticoats in public. As exemplified in all of the previous chapters, these performances held an undeniable appeal for eighteenth-century audiences. Despite comely faces or sharp voices, actresses who performed regularly in breeches were often incredibly popular. The presentation of the female form on stage was alluring and tantalizing, bringing crowds to the seats and money to the coffers. Furthermore, wearing breeches on stage was a kind of public undress that was visible to all audiences, housed within the relative safety of the playhouse rather than the brothel. In this chapter, I analyze the appeal of the travestie actress as a visual commodity, a delectable female body on display for an insatiable audience. Furthermore, I discuss how the ability to manipulate and use this visual representation could have been used by some entrepreneurial actresses to gain fame, fortune, and power.

There are very few images that remain of Charlotte Charke; we are, instead, left with her own words to remember her by. But Mrs. Charke's lack of surviving iconography is an anomaly. Of the eighteenth-century actresses who regularly performed travestie roles, she is received peculiarly little artistic attention. Although Miss Woffington's beauty in skirts and in pants was well documented, I will focus instead in this final chapter on the iconographic representations of Mrs. Dorothy "Dora" Jordan.

Using Mrs. Jordan as a case study, I aim to dissect the various ways in which actresses have been immortalized in iconography as ideal specimens of female beauty and how actresses like Mrs. Jordan used those representations of ideal femininity to gain power and public appeal both inside and outside of the theatre. Turning specifically to representations of her roles in breeches, I maintain that audiences of the period only found such cross-dressed performances acceptable if the body in the breeches was young and well-formed. As the body of the actress changed, I maintain that an actresses' acceptability in travestie roles shifted as well. Beginning her career in skirts and transitioning to pants, Mrs. Jordan became the mistress of the Duke of Clarence to the simultaneous joy and irritation of her audiences. In artistic representation, she moves from comic muse to exciting travestie to disgraced caricature to penitent mother. Tracking her evolution through her performances and iconography, this chapter explores the various stages of Mrs. Jordan's life as a popular travestie performer and royal mistress.

### *Introducing Mrs. Dora Jordan*

In November of 1761, an English stagehand by the name of Francis Bland and his Welsh actress/mistress, Grace Phillips, gave birth to their daughter, Dorothy Bland, outside the city of Dublin.<sup>1</sup> The children of strolling players, Dorothy and her siblings grew up in and around the theatre. Although her mother was very conscious of the trials and tribulations of becoming an actress, she allowed young Dorothy to join her on the stage. Having shown an aptitude for comedic timing, Dorothy was a welcome addition to

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Tomalin. *Mrs. Jordan's Profession: The Actress and the Prince*. New York: Knopf, 1995. 9.

their nomadic troupe. Despite having a fairly normal childhood for a family of actors, her father abandoned their family when Dorothy was thirteen. When their troupe was no longer as successful, he moved back to London and married an Irish heiress, leaving Dorothy's mother to take care of herself and her five children as a single actress.<sup>2</sup> As was seen in the last chapter on Mrs. Charke, being a single mother was no easy task, let alone a single mother whose only source of income was acting. Knowing that her mother needed help financing their family, Dorothy quickly began working wherever she could to help out. She began selling hats as a shop assistant and she continued in her mother's footsteps upon the stage.<sup>3</sup>

Her first role was that of Miss Lucy in Henry Fielding's afterpiece *The Virgin Unmasked*. Playing an innocent young woman making a mockery of marriage, she made her audience laugh and felt the lure of the stage. It wasn't long until the young Miss Dorothy was noticed by other theatre managers and theatregoers. She was picked up by the Theatre Royal in Cork at the age of thirteen, securing a steady paycheck for her family. Unfortunately, the theatre manager there, Richard Daly, took advantage of his authority in the theatre, wooing the young actress and eventually getting her pregnant (despite already being a married man). It is unknown whether his affections were returned by the sixteen-year old actress. Most accounts of their relationship claim that the young Dorothy Bland was raped by Daly and forced to leave the country upon the realization of her pregnancy.

Biographer and historian Claire Tomalin writes of Daly and Jordan's relationship: "There are various accounts of what happened between them. It may have been what is

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<sup>2</sup> Tomalin, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 17.



these days called sexual harassment and in those days had no name at all; or it may have started as outright rape.”<sup>4</sup> Having only played women at this point in her young career, I believe that Dorothy was represented in public as a demure, innocent, and naïve young woman. Although her characters were often willful women, she was still enveloped in the purity of youth. Daly, a confident and powerful older man, could have easily taken advantage of the young starlet, promising her fame and fortune to help support her struggling family. Whether she gave in to Daly’s authoritative power or was overtaken by his physical power, Dorothy was forced to take a brief exit from the stage to take care of her new child and to regain control over her own body and career.

She and her family left the Theatre Royal immediately, moving to England to remove Daly from their lives. Dorothy’s mother knew what it was like to be a single mother and a mistress and she did not want the same fate for her daughter. Upon arriving in London, Dorothy and her mother changed the young girl’s name from Miss Dorothy Bland to Mrs. Dora Jordan. There was no Mr. Jordan of course, but it was much easier to be socially accepted as a widow with a child than as the single mother of a bastard. Tomalin claims that she chose the name Jordan in reference to her own escape across the Irish Sea to reach safety in England (much like the biblical River Jordan).<sup>5</sup> Returning to the boards a few months later, she took up a position in Tate Wilkinson’s Yorkshire travelling company.<sup>6</sup>

Wilkinson seemed to take a particular liking to Mrs. Jordan, favoring her and making the other actresses in the company jealous. “The respectable married ladies of the

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<sup>4</sup> Tomalin,, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 28

company” attempted to create a plan “to drive her out,” claims Tomalin.<sup>7</sup> But Mrs. Jordan’s nerve was too strong and her financial dependency on the company too great to move her. She was a business woman and her priority was to the financial security of her family, not to the jealous, prattling-tongues of her company members. She did partake in a good number of romantic dealings during this time but, shaken by her time with Daly, she never found herself able to commit to any of the men who fell for her. Finding herself wealthy admirers all along the Yorkshire Circuit, Mrs. Jordan’s affairs were made all too public due to the gossip mongering of her envious company-mates, souring her reputation as a demure young lady.

The troupe eventually settled in the small town of Hull in the countryside of England for a season. Wilkinson, unable to afford moving the company any further, used the theatre-loving audience of the town to cushion the faltering finances of his troupe. Unfortunately for Mrs. Jordan, the longer the company stayed in one place, the more her own reputation was at stake. With the gossiping nature of her jealous castmates, Mrs. Jordan was the subject of much negative conversation in the town. When she performed the role of Calista in Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent*, she was hissed off the stage.<sup>8</sup> Her audience’s awareness of her extracurricular activities with men about town caused them to find her repentance in the role a sham. Although Mrs. Jordan continued to perform with the company for a few more months, this event convinced her to make the move back to London where her talents were more appreciated.

Moving to Drury Lane and earning a four-year contract with Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Mrs. Jordan took on the breeches role of Peggy in *The Country Girl* (Garrick’s

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<sup>7</sup> Tomalin, 32

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 35

adaptation of the Wycherley restoration classic, *The Country Wife*). The role fit into the archetype of the willful woman who disguises herself as a young man to gain access to masculine entertainments and locations; the kind of role that she was most popular for in Ireland and in the countryside. Her instant audience appeal in comedic breeches roles earned her the title of the “comic muse” of the English stage. With a charming smile, a quick wit, and a curvaceous form, Mrs. Jordan was immortalized most famously as the comic muse by painter John Hoppner.

In this iconic image of the young actress, she is presented wearing a flowing, floor-length gown with her dainty feet planted lightly on the ground below her. She holds a mask in one hand, and the hand of a fellow muse in the other. With her full face looking directly back at the viewer of the painting, Mrs. Jordan’s features are soft and relaxed. A sly smile rests on her lips and small flowers peek out from beneath her elegant curls, blowing gently in the wind. A satyr looks at her lasciviously from behind a tree as the other



Figure 8: Hoppner’s “Mrs. Jordan in the Character of the Comic Muse.” Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

muse in the image attempts to avert his lewd eyes from the beauty and grace of Mrs. Jordan’s figure. Although Mrs. Jordan was still partaking in romantic liaisons off stage, she had learned her earlier lessons. She brought her lovers into the public sphere,

proclaiming her innocence in their affections and her demure reactions to their love befit the decorum of the period. Coupling her visual representations as the comic muse and her newfound public image of the demure widow who was doing her best to fend off “unwanted” suitors, Mrs. Jordan was no longer seen by her audience as a simple comedic actress; she was elevated to muse status by her performances and preserved as such in popular art. Engravings and paintings of Mrs. Jordan could suddenly be found in the homes of the social elite. She sat for many contemporary artists, working to craft an image of beauty and innocence that had been denied to her by her earlier relationship with Richard Daly.

Jaded by Daly, Mrs. Jordan jumped from relationship to relationship publicly; she was the paramour of many men, including an army Lieutenant, a fellow leading actor in their troupe, and possibly even Wilkinson himself. Transitioning to Drury Lane in 1785, Mrs. Jordan was already well known about town for her talents on stage and for her flirtations off stage. Mrs. Jordan was wooed by many a man, but her affections were only returned to two of them: the young male lead, George Inchbald, and the police magistrate, Sir Richard Ford. Tomalin claims that Mrs. Jordan confessed her love to Mr. Inchbald during their time working together as members of Tate Wilkinson’s troupe but she was unfortunately rejected by him. Although they were a merry couple, he was unsure about tying himself to her so early in their careers. Tomalin notes that Mr. Inchbald returned to London in an attempt to win Mrs. Jordan back once her career was more successful but she, already having moved on to Mr. Ford, was given the satisfaction of rejecting him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tomalin, 72.

Mr. Ford, a gentleman of much social and political power, enjoyed Mrs. Jordan's performances and, eventually, fell for her. She, in turn, felt a strong affection for him, hoping to one day marry him. He was financially stable, something Mrs. Jordan longed for, and was said to be a "gentle, well-educated and serious" man.<sup>10</sup> They lived together as if they were married, walked about town as if they were married, and had three children together as if they were married. But, being a man of high social class and beholden to the whims and morality of his traditionally-minded father for much of his inheritance, Mr. Ford never offered marriage to his mistress for fear of being written out of his father's will.

The elder Mr. Ford could not abide his son marrying an illegitimate woman, let alone a "widowed" actress with a child of her own. Furthermore, she may have been known as a comic muse, but her breeches roles were still a matter of moral taboo for some members of the more pious elite. Mrs. Jordan's public and ill-fated relationship with Mr. Ford was often the subject of gossip columns. The *Town and Country Magazine* claimed

Mrs. Tomboy has always been prudent in her amours. Her present favourite (Ford) is not the choice of love; his proximity to one of the proprietors of the theatre secures her a strong interest which she wisely considers of more real value than any immediate pecuniary advantage.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Jordan's many letters to and from Mr. Ford's sister seem to imply that her affections for Mr. Ford were pure, but who is to say that such political gains were not far from her mind? Mr. Ford was a wealthy and powerful man: his love could easily have been used to keep her contracts with Drury Lane intact if anyone should ever turn against her (as she

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<sup>10</sup> Tomalin, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Clare Jerrold. *The Story of Dora Jordan*. London: Eveleigh Nash, 1914. 251.

had experienced within Wilkinson's troupe). But while Ford continued to deny her of an official marriage, she soon found herself the obsession of a much more significant suitor: William, Duke of Clarence, later King William IV of Hanover and the United Kingdom. It would be her relationship with the Duke that would most heavily influence her travestie performances, her public reception, and her iconographic representations.

### *Tight Curls and Trim Legs*

Not only was she talented, but wherever Mrs. Jordan went, she was followed by a throng of young suitors longing for her affection. Mrs. Dora Jordan was never described as having a beautiful face; her nose was long and her jaw came to a harsh point. Despite these physical shortcomings, she was sprightly in her walk, graceful and strong in her comedic performances, with her ringlet curls bouncing to and fro as she whisked herself across the stage. And when her formidable form was presented in tight-fitting breeches, she quickly became the talk of the town. As historian Claire Tomalin recounts in her biography of the actress,

She was never considered a beauty. There was too much nose and chin about her face for that; but she had a charming and expressive face... She was neatly made, not tall, with a small waist and what the eighteenth-century called a symmetrical shape. Her most striking feature was probably her great mop of brown curls... Her legs naturally went unnoticed until she appeared in male costume on stage, when they were found to be exceptionally beautiful... and thereafter in constant demand.<sup>12</sup>

It was that mop of curls and her exceptionally beautiful legs that, I claim, helped to make her travestie performances particularly popular. Furthermore, I assert that her decision to keep her curls visible throughout her various performances, rather than use the more

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<sup>12</sup> Tomalin, 19.

popular wigs of the period, was a distinct choice made by Mrs. Jordan to control her own public image. Having fallen prey to appearing too feminine and vulnerable with Daly and having been booed off the stage for her masculine forwardness in her offstage relationships while in Wilkinson's touring company, Mrs. Jordan knew the dangers of appearing too feminine or too masculine. When her curly mop of hair (a signifier of femininity) was combined with her trim legs (seen in trousers, a signifier of masculinity), Mrs. Jordan's body displayed the gender binary in one simultaneous space; a visual paradox for her audience to see and enjoy.

Young Mrs. Jordan's looks were a key part of her early career success. Known by many as the comic muse, she was best loved for her breeches and travestie performances, showing off her legs and using her tangled curls to her advantage. Tomalin goes so far as to call her "a perfect girl-boy in her young man's breeches that showed her slim waist and pretty legs."<sup>13</sup> It is the use of the phrase "girl-boy" that interests me most. Within the existing iconography of Mrs. Jordan, she is represented as an androgynous figure; she is both masculine and feminine, both boy and girl. I maintain that Mrs. Jordan was crafting her own image through her choice to keep her feminine curls visible. She was both man and woman in a single form; an anomaly that was objectively beautiful to all who saw her. Mrs. Jordan's hair and body was feminine but she wore and performed the signs of masculinity convincingly enough to amuse, entertain, and appeal to the sexual desires of both sexes.

As Mrs. Jordan's stars continued to rise, Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres, in anxious attempts to outdo one another, endeavored to pit the young Mrs. Jordan (of

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<sup>13</sup> Tomalin, 21.

Drury Lane) against the established breeches actress, Mrs. Brown (of Covent Garden).<sup>14</sup> But, according to historian and biographer Clare Jerrold, the effort to uncrown Mrs. Jordan was in vain. Mrs. Brown, a talented actress with many years of experience under her belt in performing breeches roles, was no match for the youthful vigor and curvaceous form of the fresh-faced Mrs. Jordan. Comparing their performances of Peggy in *The Country Girl*, Jerrold claims that “Dorothy had the gorgeous quality of youth: the laughter, the innocence, the ingenuous air all seemed real; while Mrs. Brown was a matron ‘long past the season in which alone the hoyden can look natural and prove attractive.’”<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Jordan’s talent and figure won out, keeping her crown as comic muse and placing her squarely in comparison with the comedic powerhouses of Miss Woffington before her and the incomparable Kitty Clive.

Mrs. Jordan’s performances in pants became so popular that critic William Hazlitt wrote of her in 1807 as “the finest breeches figure, as the newspapers gloatingly call it, upon the British stage.”<sup>16</sup> Although Hazlitt was not fond of travestie or breeches performances due to what he saw as indecorous actions these parts made proper ladies perform publicly, he begrudgingly admitted that his beloved Mrs. Jordan was particularly well-suited for such roles due to the beauty of her own physical parts. A fan of her early

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<sup>14</sup>Although Mrs. Brown was popular in comedic roles, she was primarily a supporting actress; disappearing from theatrical history outside of a few sparse footnotes in the most detailed histories. John Davis Batchelder. *The Thespian Dictionary; or, Dramatic Biography of the Eighteenth-century: Containing Sketches of the Lives, Productions, &c., of All the Principal Managers, Dramatists, Composers, Commentators, Actors, and Actresses, of the United Kingdom: Interspersed with Several Original Anecdotes; and Forming a Concise History of the English Stage*. London: Printed by J. Cundee for T. Hurst, 1802. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Jerrold, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Critical essays on the performers of the London theatres: including general observations on the practise and genius of the stage / by the author of the theatrical criticisms in the weekly paper called The News*. London: Printed by and for John Hunt, 1807. 82.



comedic performances, he was one of those critics who knew Mrs. Jordan as the comic muse, the other half to Sarah Siddons's tragic muse.<sup>17</sup>

Leigh Hunt, another eighteenth-century critic, acknowledges that portions of Mrs. Jordan's anatomy, primarily her thighs and calves, were exceptionally beautiful. He recalls in his *Critical Essays* that Mrs. Jordan's legs had been so beloved by audiences and artists alike that they had been copied in paintings and molded for contemporary statuary, placing the body of Mrs. Jordan on public display to be admired even when she was not upon the stage.<sup>18</sup> Though an interesting claim, any statuary of Mrs. Jordan's legs has since been lost to the annals of time. But much art still exists showcasing her feminine form in male garb, particularly showing off her incredibly popular thighs and calves for public consumption. Jerrold writes that even cartoonists of the period were drawn to illustrating her formidable figure for print:

Indeed, the symmetry of her lower parts... was a constant inspiration to the journalistic pen. A year or two later one of the monthly magazines published a picture in which Mrs. Jordan, as Harry Wildair, and Mrs. Crouch<sup>19</sup> were depicted as comparing the beauty of their silk-hosed legs for the judgment of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Clarence.<sup>20</sup>

Although I have not been able to uncover this particular image in my own research, the point of the cartoon still comes through. Both women were the objects of affection for navy men and the comparison of their silk-hosed legs invited all who had access to them on the stage and in print to pay close attention to the feminine curves they were so willing to display.

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Siddons was known as the tragic muse around this same time in the London theatre. She was a powerhouse in tragedies, making a name for herself through her powerful voice, dramatic gestures, and fresh takes on Shakespearean tragic heroines.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Batchelder, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Jerrold, 117.

Mrs. Jordan's forays into travestie performance were a large part of her iconographic memory. Parson Bate, another eighteenth-century theatre critic, said of her first appearance in the breeches role of Peggy in *The Country Girl*: "She is universally allowed to possess a figure, small perhaps, but neat and elegant, as was remarkably conspicuous when she was dressed as a boy."<sup>21</sup> Trim but curvy, her figure was well-suited for breeches and travestie. Having crafted her brand as the feminine comic muse of the eighteenth-century stage, I claim that Mrs. Jordan was able to keep her popularity and moral image despite beginning to branch from breeches to travestie performance. She was known to her public as a willful young woman through the strength of her breeches roles and as a comic muse through the dainty decorum and comedic timing of her traditional female roles. She was a chameleon, able to shift between the two styles of performance without losing a sense of herself in the process. Unable to disconnect Mrs. Jordan's onstage performances with her offstage life, the London audiences saw her as a fluctuating androgyny; she was masculine when necessary, but she was still principally a vulnerable and modest woman.

Mrs. Jordan decided to attempt her first travestie role in 1788. Following in the footsteps of Miss Woffington before her, she attempted Sir Harry Wildair as her introduction to travestie performance. Historian Dror Wahrman explains, "In London in the 1770s and 1780s, six different actresses tried to step into Woffington's boots in this role: most notably Dorothy Jordan, who made *The Constant Couple* more successful than it had ever been since the days of Woffington."<sup>22</sup> Jerrold includes one critic's praise of

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<sup>21</sup> Jerrold, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 51

her “sweet and distinct” voice, “play[ing] rakes with the airiest grace and handsomest leg that had been seen on the stage for a long time.”<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Jordan’s comedic chops coupled with her attractive figure and penchant for pants boosted her career to new heights, as she knew it would. Moving quickly from supporting comic roles to the lead comic actress of her troupe, Mrs. Jordan’s travestie performance of Sir Harry Wildair was the stepping stone to her greatest success.

Her popularity in travestie was, in part, due to her physical shape. Mrs. Jordan’s legs in particular were exceptionally well loved by her audience. Costumed in travestie, her “slight, beautiful figure was shown to perfection,” claims Jerrold.<sup>24</sup> Her talent and figure were the envy of all, and the gem of theatre managers. When Covent Garden manager, Edwin Harris, contracted her for a week’s engagement at Richmond in 1789, he announced her advent in a prologue, proclaiming “My next vast merit, I must have a word on!/ Ecod! D’ye know, I’ve got you Mistress Jordan!” The remaining lines of his proclamation made mention of her legs, her ankles, and her feet, sexualizing her performance through her physical body parts. The announcement also promised the girls in the audience a kiss from Sir Harry Wildair (to be played by Mrs. Jordan).<sup>25</sup>

Despite her conventionally unfeminine willingness to present some of the intimate parts of her body for public display, Mrs. Jordan had taken the time and the pains to craft her image as the beloved comic muse for almost a decade before attempting her first travestie role. To see her in breeches for the entirety of a show (rather than in just a few scenes) was a delight for her audiences. She was still the feminine comic muse, her

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<sup>23</sup> Jerrold, 117.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

bouncing curls and dainty smile as she pointed and winked to her audience were reminders of that. With the image of her as comic muse solidly bound in public memory, she could carry the mantle of masculinity in travestie performance without the fear of being overly masculinized by her public.

Theatre historian Gill Perry also claims that Mrs. Jordan's "famous curls" could be understood as "a potent visual and literary sign for both her status as a theatrical performer and her potentially flirtatious identity as a woman."<sup>26</sup> I want to take Perry's assertion one step further. I maintain that Mrs. Jordan's natural, unruly curls could be perhaps better understood as a direct invitation for flirtation. There was nothing "potentially flirtatious" about it; Mrs. Jordan's hair, especially when coupled with her breeches, was an invitation for the audience to admire her beauty and remember her womanly figure. The social elite of the period wore their hair in high coiffures, adding extensions to their natural hair to create more volume. They would also curl, frizz, or wave their hair in an attempt to create texture. Often powdering their hair, women rarely let their tresses be presented in public untouched. To see a woman's natural hair signified that one had seen her in a stage of undress. Mrs. Jordan's natural hair, unaided by curling tools, powders, or extensions, could be understood as a presentation of herself unmasked, uncostumed, undressed.

After her disastrous beginnings with Richard Daly, and her various relationships throughout the early stages of her career, Mrs. Jordan was beginning to understand her own sexuality and how her physical body could appeal to the public eye. Although her breeches signified that she was playing a man, Mrs. Jordan's mass of tightly-spiraled hair

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<sup>26</sup> Gill Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 91.

was one visual reminder that she was in reality a very real, very desirable woman. Opting to use her own hair rather than wigs, Mrs. Jordan's representations of masculinity were contradictorily highlighted by her feminine shape and natural hair. Her mass of curls, loosely tied back in a low ponytail, imitated the fashionable male periwig; furthering her ability to present manhood on stage without the need of artificial accessories. While men often had to wear such wigs to play the part, Mrs. Jordan simply had to tie back her own hair.

Turning to artist William Hogarth's 1753 theoretical writings and engravings in his manuscript *The Analysis of Beauty*, a single curl can be used to understand the rest of the mass of hair:

The most amiable [form] in itself is the flowing curl; and the many waving and contrasted turns of naturally intermingling locks ravish the eye with the pleasure of pursuit, especially when they are put in motion by a gentle breeze.<sup>27</sup>

It does not take much to imagine Mrs. Jordan's curls in motion, particularly as she portrays the high-energy rake of Sir Harry Wildair. Briskly swaggering across the stage to flirt with Lady Lurewell or hopping delightfully into Angelica's bed, Mrs. Jordan's curls would have been hard to ignore. Hogarth's language highlights the erotic nature of the curl, signifying the sexual potential in following the curves of hair much like the curves of the female form. A single curl of hair can represent the natural ebb and flow of the female form, both in shape and in motion. Mrs. Jordan's curls, left natural, amplify this image: leaving the audience to imagine the natural curls on the top of her head as well as anywhere else on her lithe, young body (especially beneath her figure-hugging trousers). Combining the visual emphasis of these curls with the vision of Mrs. Jordan's

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<sup>27</sup> William Hogarth. *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a view of fixing the fluctuating Ideas of Taste*. London: Printed by W. Strahan for Mrs. Hogarth, 1772. 34-5.

trim legs in trousers, various artists of the period were quick to immortalize her in their work.

Iconography of young Mrs. Jordan relied heavily on artist interpretations of her curvaceous figure and tangled curls. Most of these images highlight her feminine shape in a static pose rather than in motion. Artists used her masculine costumes to shape their interpretations of the female figure. Looking to W. A. Chambers' 1788 print of Mrs. Jordan as Sir Harry Wildair, she is depicted as an unmistakably female figure. Her strong curves are accentuated by her demure pose, dainty hands, and tiny feet. Her curls are tied back in a loose bow beneath the traditionally foppish hat of the character. A long sword hangs by her side, half obscured by a fashionable long coat. Rosy cheeks and soft lips complete the engraving, showcasing Mrs. Jordan's delicate, feminine features despite her masculine garb. The sword and the hat, signs of masculinity, are visual reminders of the male sex: the large hat and the long sword lazily swinging by her thigh compensate for Mrs. Jordan's own lack of male genitalia.

Meanwhile her tangle of curls, her dainty features, and her tiny feet visually mark her as a member of the female sex. With her hand slightly outstretched, she is beckoning her audience to look at her, even though her own stare is demurely avoided by the artist's choice to paint her in three-quarter profile. Breaking open the tropes of binary



Figure 9: Mrs. Jordan as Sir Harry Wildair. Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

masculinity and femininity, Mrs. Jordan's iconography represents a complex combination of both genders. She held within her image the vision of feminine beauty and prepubescent boyish charm. Modest and masculine, Mrs. Jordan's image is a performance of gender fluidity.

Another popular portrait of Mrs. Jordan in breeches is the 1790 James Heath line engraving of her in the costume of Hippolyta. Sword drawn and raised high above her head, Mrs. Jordan's form is presented in form-fitting tights and trousers. Her tiny feet are clad in small shoes and a cape drapes behind her. She wears a large, feathered hat but her hair remains unconcealed. Her long curls flow down the side of her face and over her shoulder, a river of ringlets visually interrupted by her sword-arm. Her facial features are dainty and slight despite her strong stance; she stands with legs apart, as if she is in the middle of running toward a romantic foe. The image is otherwise uninteresting—its primary focus is on the form of Mrs. Jordan's strong calves and the way her curves appear beneath her costume.



Figure 10: Mrs. Jordan as Hippolyta. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

### *Little Pickle and the Duke of Clarence*

The Duke of Clarence first witnessed Mrs. Jordan perform in the early summer of 1789. He had come to the playhouse to see his friend, John Bannister, perform the role of

Ben in Congreve's *Love for Love*.<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Jordan played his Miss Prue to much acclaim. Mrs. Jordan was still pursuing a familial romance with Mr. Ford at the time and, though her performance was successful, it did not seem to win over the heart of the young Duke. After taking a short reprieve from the stage to mourn the loss of her mother in the summer of 1789, she returned to the stage in November of that same year, performing the travestie role of Little Pickle in *The Spoiled Child*.<sup>29</sup> This particular performance seems to be the one that opened the Duke's eyes to her beauty and talent.

Little Pickle, a mischievous young boy, played delightful pranks on his friends and neighbors, tying people's clothing together and even substituting a pet parrot for the chicken being prepared for a large dinner. Unlike the travestie performances of Sir Harry Wildair, a charming rake, Little Pickle was a new kind of travestie that had not been performed before. Mrs. Jordan's travestie was playful, innocent, and boyish; she was no threat to the sexuality of the audience watching her. She was, instead, a purely delightful representation of Mrs. Jordan's comic muse, only in masculine breeches. The play itself was a true farce, full of comic disarray but lacking much explicit sexual innuendo.

Mrs. Jordan's performance of the travestie role was greeted with applause and excitement. Clad in her snug breeches with her long curls tied back to mimic a young boy's ponytail, she sang a song about the navy entitled "What girls but loves the merry Tar."<sup>30</sup> Little Pickle proclaims in a boisterous voice:

I am a brisk and sprightly lad,/ Just come home from sea, sir,/ Of all the lives I  
ever led,/ A sailor's life for me, sir... What girl but loves the marry Tar,/ That

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<sup>28</sup> Tomalin, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Tomalin, 109.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 110. A "Tar" being an English term for a navy seaman.



o'er the ocean roams, sir,/ In ev'ry clime we find a port,/ In ev'ry port a home,  
sir./ Yeo, Yeo, Yeo!<sup>31</sup>

It is no wonder that the Duke, a navy man, was suddenly unable to forget the actress. With her boyish charm and vigor and her proclamations of loving the sea (rather than loving women like many other travestie roles), it may have been difficult to disassociate Mrs. Jordan from the lovely Little Pickle she performed. After his first time witnessing Mrs. Jordan perform in travestie, the Duke was seen much more regularly at the Drury Lane theatre.<sup>32</sup>

Despite her public relationship with Mr. Ford, the Duke began to court Mrs. Jordan in November of 1790.<sup>33</sup> Doing her best not to ruin her reputation, Mrs. Jordan claims that she did nothing to encourage the Duke's affections while she was still with Richard Ford. The *Bon Ton Magazine* even printed a report on their interactions, announcing that "The Duke of Clarence's penchant for a certain celebrated actress, notwithstanding what report says, has proved unsuccessful. The fact is the Ford is too dangerous for him to cross the Jordan."<sup>34</sup> Her public applauded Mrs. Jordan's upstanding actions to keep the Duke at bay. Loyal to Mr. Ford, she continued to uphold the image she had crafted for her audience.

But, as Tomalin suggests, "she must have been flattered and amused. She may have even enjoyed people speculating about William's attentions, and she may have even thought it good for business."<sup>35</sup> But business was never an issue when Mrs. Jordan was

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<sup>31</sup> J. Roach. *The New Evergreen, Being a Select Collection of the Most Celebrated Songs: English, Scotch, & Irish, with Toasts and Sentiments*. London: Britannia Printing Office, 1818. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Tomalin, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>34</sup> Jerrold, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Tomalin, 115.

concerned. If the theatre's numbers were down, she simply needed to don her breeches and perform a travestie role to fill the house to bursting. There was a power in her travestie performances that was undeniable. Despite having seen her perform in skirts first, the Duke truly noticed and fell for Mrs. Jordan in her breeches as Little Pickle. He even planned to throw a large garden party, inviting every "family of rank or consequence in Richmond, and the adjoining Villages" to pay tribute to Mrs. Jordan's talents but, when she denied his invitation for fear of public scandal, the Duke immediately cancelled the benefit without a second thought to social taboo.<sup>36</sup>

It was 1791 when Mrs. Jordan finally realized that her relationship with Mr. Ford would never be more than an affair. With this revelation weighing heavily on her heart, she turned her hopes toward the enamored young Duke. No stranger to gossip columns, Tomalin explains that "the storm of abuse that broke about her when she was known to have accepted the Duke's advances was unlike anything she had experienced before."<sup>37</sup> Her flight from Ford's bed directly into the Duke's embrace shattered her decorous public image. Eighteenth-century audiences loved to see her trim thighs and her bouncy curls. They loved to laugh along with her as she performed her various breeches and travestie roles. But the world around her was also changing and, unfortunately for Mrs. Jordan, her leap to the Duke of Clarence was very ill-timed. Cross-dressing was becoming taboo and the appeal of travestie was beginning to wane in many parts of England. The public image that she had spent so long crafting was already in danger due to her travestie performances. Leigh Hunt, a critic of the period, vocally denounced the convention of actresses in male costume. He argued that

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<sup>36</sup> Tomalin, 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

...the more women strain their limbs to imitate men, the more likely they are to do serious damage to their femininity. The actress is thus in danger of metamorphosing irreversibly into the masculine gender.<sup>38</sup>

Theatre historian Kerry Powell notes a similarly blunt reproach by an unnamed critic in the *Era*:

...it is only the unsexed woman, the masculine woman who, physically and physiologically, approaches nearly to the masculine—the monstrosity in short—who can deceive us as to her gender.<sup>39</sup>

Such anxieties reveal a need to control the actress's sexuality, to remove any potential subversive power from the female body. To perform in travestie was to become a liar, a deceiver, an untrustworthy figure willing to present herself in a state of undress for visual public consumption. Mrs. Jordan's forays in breeches thrust her body into the public gaze, crossing socially defined gender boundaries and complicating public acceptance of socially prescribed gender roles. Performing in travestie was as artistically inspiring as it was socially monstrous. Mrs. Jordan, intelligent and entrepreneurial, was able to capitalize on this contradiction. She had constructed herself as the comic muse of the London public theatre all while using the power of her breeches and travestie performances for her financial and social gain. She used her travesties to play the patriarchal system to her advantage, blinding her audiences to her social power in pants with the carefully crafted image of the vulnerable comic muse. She had manipulated her audience into seeing her as non-threatening, but her new connections to the Duke broke the illusion she had worked so hard to create.

Her multitude of public relationships only furthered such demonization of the young actress, likening her to a glorified whore. Mrs. Jordan's romantic escapades made

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<sup>38</sup> Hunt, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Kerry Powell. *Women and Victorian Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 30.

her more of a pariah than a saint. Jerrold notes that one biographer, “shocked at her wifely connection with the Duke of Clarence, called her a degraded woman, who had brought disgrace upon an honourable profession.”<sup>40</sup> This particular comment is strangely humorous, considering the profession of acting (especially as a woman) was rarely considered an honorable profession during the eighteenth-century. Yet, the criticism stuck, the connections between acting and prostitution being far too easy to draw. And, I maintain, that the public image of her in travestie only managed to increase this audience outrage. Her comfortability in breeches was suddenly suspect; had she been performing in breeches all along due to her own masculine tendencies and desire for political and social power? As Kerri Powell asserts, “The medley of fear and admiration was rooted in a nervous perception that the exceptional actress could and sometimes did work free of the constraints of her gender, trespassing on the territory of men.”<sup>41</sup> Assumed to be using her professional success to climb the ladder of social hierarchy, Mrs. Jordan was transformed from a beloved comedic actress whose performances in pants were a paradoxical delight to a manipulative female monstrosity overnight.

*Critics and Comics: From Muse to Monster*

It did not take long for the flattering images of Mrs. Jordan in flowing feminine gowns and flirtatious male costume to be replaced in public memory and in print with the unattractive satirical cartoons of James Gillray and his contemporaries. One particularly haunting image relied on the unfortunate eighteenth-century double meaning of her

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<sup>40</sup> Jerrold, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Powell, 14.

surname: a “Jordan” was also a common term for a chamber pot.<sup>42</sup> The image portrays Mrs. Jordan as a giant chamber pot with a distinctly vaginal-shaped crack into which the half-disrobed Duke is disappearing. Her dainty feet stick out below the chamber pot while she gives a nautical cry of pleasure; “Yeo! Yeo! Yeo” she cries, a line she sung so boldly as Little Pickle. The cartoon is cruelly titled



Figure 11: Gillray’s “Lubber’s Hole, alias The Crack’d Jordan.” Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

“Lubber’s Hole, alias The Crack’d Jordan.” Her feminine figure replaced with an anthropomorphized chamber pot, Mrs. Jordan

was suddenly transformed into a comical toilet in the public mind. Multiple cartoons began to include chamber pots with the initials D.J. engraved upon them, indicating that the chamber pot and Dora Jordan were one and the same. One particularly poignant comic depicts a woman pouring their contents of such a chamber pot on a representation of Mrs. Jordan dressed as Little Pickle. She dances in the streets with a tambourine in hand while two men play a horn and carry a large box with a crank on the side, likening herself to a dancing monkey, all while a doctor in the balcony above her holds a baby in forceps and comments on the child of “Mrs. Pickle” and a “Young Sea Gull.”

Despite many other actresses taking royal or landed gentleman as their paramours, Mrs. Jordan’s relationship with the Duke was attacked incredibly harshly. While scandal

<sup>42</sup> Tomalin, 122.



Figure 12: Cartoon of Mrs. Jordan as Little Pickle. Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

and hoping to raise one's self up in society was one thing, it seems as though Mrs. Jordan's affair was understood as something more. Not unlike fellow actresses Nell Gwynn, Mary "Perdita" Robinson, or Moll Davis (all of whom took up the role of mistress to a wealthy and royal patron), Mrs. Jordan began living a double life—one on the stage and the other in the bed of the Duke. She knew that her affections for the Duke could lead to a much better life for herself and her family. Mrs. Jordan's

relationship with the Duke was criticized and feared, and the attention he paid to the actress (and the heirs he produced with her being illegitimate and unable to sit the throne) was understood as detrimental to society.

With the French attempting to reform their society against the frivolous actions of their throne across the channel, the English were less than excited to hear of the monetary allowance the Duke was giving to his actress mistress. Furthermore, her relationship with the Duke gave her access to a modicum of political power. For an actress, let alone one most famous for breeches and travestie roles, to be that close to the man who would be king was terrifying for some members of eighteenth-century English society. She held much influence over the Duke, and her opinions could easily sway his own. The power of

her travestie performances led to the Duke's bed, and that same power could easily change the course of English history with a single word whispered in the ear of her newly enamored lover.

The thing that interests me most in this cultural moment is the reactions to Mrs. Jordan's affair with the Duke when compared with the reactions to Nell Gwynn's affair with King Charles II. I claim that audiences were more open to Nell Gwynn's affair with royalty due to her own presentation of self—her own myth creation that modeled her character on and off the stage. She began her career in the theatre as an orange wench, selling herself and her oranges to her audience. There was never any question to Nell Gwynn's intentions with King Charles II. She was not shy about her prior relationships or her life, never trying to hide her numerous affairs from public eye. In the case of Mrs. Jordan, her extramarital affairs were taboo. She hid what she could and attempted to appear in public as socially decorous as possible. To be named a mistress was to be associated with prostitution; she was paid an allowance for her services as his mistress. Although there does seem to have been love in their relationship, Mrs. Jordan was still the Duke's mistress, and (legally) nothing more.

Politically speaking, Gwynn was connected directly with the King of England, a much more powerful person in the grand scheme of the English stage. But with the French revolution looming, Mrs. Jordan's connections to the throne were dangerous. The English wanted nothing to do with France's reformation and riots but Mrs. Jordan, an English woman, was directly associated to the man who would be King. Audiences were unsure of her allegiances. Would she leave the stage if the Duke became King? Would the King hold it against all of England if she were to deny him? Knowing the possible

political and social results of disastrous affairs (King Henry VIII left quite the mark on English history), the English audience was bound to be upset by Mrs. Jordan's royal lover.

Mrs. Jordan's performances as a man on stage were meant as comedy, but I claim that her audience may have suddenly feared that she had taken her masculine costumes too seriously. It was common knowledge that Mrs. Jordan's guidance led the Duke to largely give up drinking and that he often took her advice.<sup>43</sup> Mrs. Jordan may have been born of a lower class, but she was quick to understand the social graces and expectations of the upper class. When the Duke was unable to attend social functions or ran the risk of upsetting important members of the royal family, Mrs. Jordan was often the one to heal any social wounds for him.<sup>44</sup> Although their relationship may have begun with Mrs. Jordan being reliant on the Duke's wealth, it did not take long for the power dynamics to shift. The Duke soon found himself reliant on Mrs. Jordan as more than a bedwarmer, but also as a confidant, a friend, a mentor, and an advisor.

When the Duke was denied a naval fleet to lead, Mrs. Jordan's stage career became the couple's strongest source of income, unmanning the young Duke and amplifying Mrs. Jordan's perceived social and political power. As Clare Jerrold writes,

The *Bon Ton* and many other periodicals asserted that he was so short of money that he collected Mrs. Jordan's salary in person, and even took it in advance on the night of the performance. As early as November 3 it was reported at the end of a paragraph that: "We have only to add that as Banker to Her Highness he actually received her week's salary from the Treasurer on Saturday last!" ...Other gibes followed, one paper going so far as to say that the Duke forbade Dorothy to appear unless the money were first paid.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tomalin, 130.

<sup>44</sup> Jerrold, 253.

<sup>45</sup> Jerrold, 176-7.



Without her steady paychecks, the Duke would have fallen even more in debt; he was beholden to Mrs. Jordan in a way that gave her political and social leverage. Even though there is no record of her abusing such power, the power in their relationship was undeniably hers. To use a contemporary phrase, Mrs. Jordan suddenly wore the pants in her family; she was the brains and the breadwinner, leaving the Duke with nothing much to claim as his own.

Once the Duke finally received a new command, his father's health began to decline. He was suddenly thrown into higher social standing again, picking up the slack where the ailing King and Queen lagged behind. Meanwhile, Mrs. Jordan's career took her on numerous tours across the country. Rarely seeing one another, the couple continued to write letters back and forth. Unfortunately for Mrs. Jordan, her words were not enough to keep the Duke's lonely eyes from roving. With the Duke having met the gentlewoman Miss Tylney Long sometime in 1811, Mrs. Jordan realized that she was no longer the Duke's only romantic interest. When he learned shortly thereafter that he was even further in debt than he had originally believed, the Duke quickly set himself to the task of finding a suitable (wealthy) woman to marry. Tomlin writes that "When Miss Long turned him down, he immediately set about proposing to other rich women, though with no better luck."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately for Mrs. Jordan, marriage to her was out of the question due to her own illegitimate birth and lack of landed fortune. She heard of his amorous exploits secondhand, knowing all too well what would happen next for her. Mrs. Jordan, now fifty years of age and lacking the physical figure that had made her such a popular travestie actress, resigned herself to her new station. Although the Duke had

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<sup>46</sup> Tomalin, 246.

agreed to support their children and Mrs. Jordan's eldest children from Daly and Ford, she was no longer to be his mistress. Pushed from the Bushy country home she had lived in with the Duke and her family for almost two decades, Mrs. Jordan returned to London heavy-hearted.

### *Turning the Tide, But Losing the Travestie*

After being unfairly treated by the Duke, the London public suddenly appeared to favor her once more. She had become *The Fair Penitent's* Calista, the same character that the people of Hull had hissed. She was a penitent woman trying to make amends with her community and start a new life. Unlike Gillray's earlier harsh cartoon of Mrs. Jordan anthropomorphized, the Duke became the subject of discontent in public iconography with the figure of Mrs. Jordan playing the victim. In a ghastly image called "Princely Piety, or the Worshippers at Wanstead," the throne is depicted with the grotesque image of the King and Queen atop their golden seat, the King a corpse and the Queen a golden

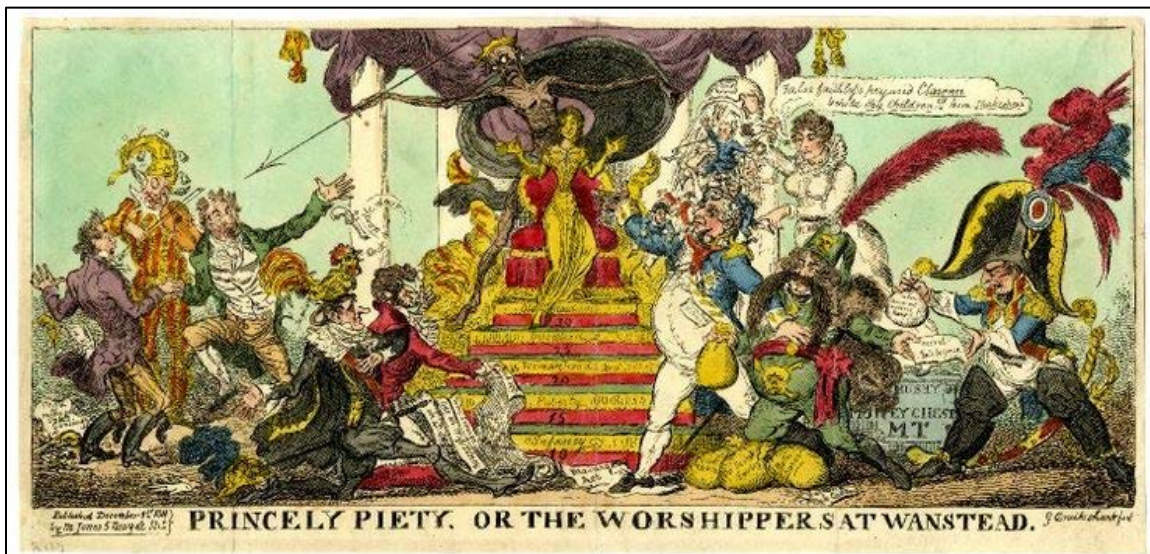
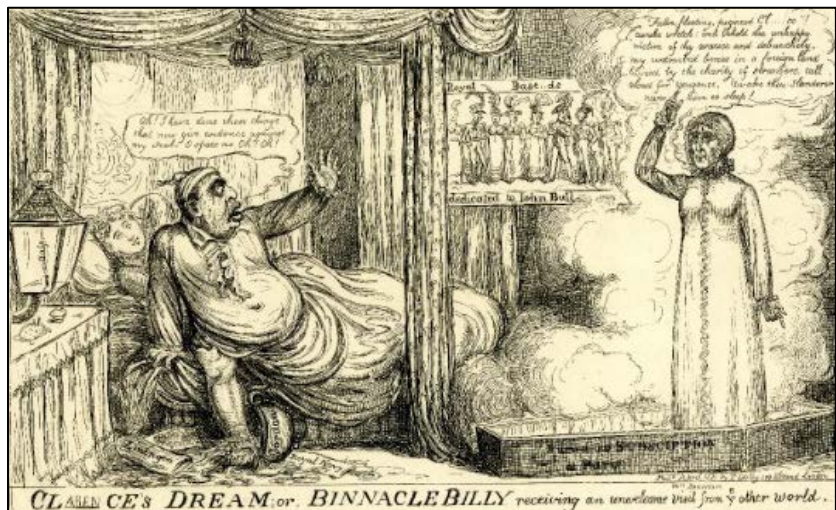


Figure 13: Gillray's "Princely Piety, Or the Worshippers at Wanstead." Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

statue. Those vying for the throne (including the Duke of Clarence) are seen in the foreground, attempting to make their way up the staircase to the throne. Behind the Duke of Clarence stands Dora Jordan, dressed in white with her curls and buxom chest visible. She pours over his head a chamber pot, out of which spills the bodies of their many children. She stands upon a chest with the initials “M.T.”, proclaiming the Duke’s empty bank accounts. She is the only figure in the entire image dressed all in white, her purity and innocence proven and publicly accepted, her actions drawing attention to the Duke’s callous foolishness and clownish grab for the crown.

Her clean iconographic slate would follow her to her grave. Isaac Cruikshank, one of Gillray’s contemporaries, printed a new cartoon of the Duke and his spurned mistress in 1821 entitled “Clarence’s Dream; or, Binnacle Billy receiving an unwelcome visit from an other world.” This particular image was oddly timed, appearing five years after Mrs. Jordan’s death and three years after the Duke finally married a royal patron, the Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen. It depicted Mrs. Jordan’s ghost haunting the Duke and his new wife in their bed. Dressed in a floor-length gown and a bonnet with her curls

poking out, she stands defiantly in her own coffin, eyes raised to heaven. She speaks to the Duke in scolding Shakespearean verse, all while a painting of their many children



CLARENCE'S DREAM; OR, BINNACLE BILLY RECEIVING AN UNWELCOME VISIT FROM AN OTHER WORLD.  
 Figure 14: Cruikshank’s “Clarence’s Dream, or Binnacle Billy receiving an unwelcome visit from an other world.” Courtesy of ©Trustees of the British Museum.

hangs between them in the background. The Princess is sleepily resting in the bed while the Duke is visibly uncomfortable at the vision of his deceased mistress. Mrs. Jordan is the strong, steadfast form in the image, standing over her ex-lover in pious judgement while the Duke is turned into a ridiculous clown.

At last, Mrs. Jordan had returned to her audience, but this time as a vulnerable mother hoping to support herself and her children in any way that she could. Being relieved of her role as royal mistress, she was thrust back to her old lot, tossed down the social ladder and clinging to her old rung for support. She was no longer a threat; she was, instead, a representation of what could happen when a woman attempted to climb social ladders that were not meant for her. She was an illegitimate child who had many illegitimate children of her own. Through she had attempted to create an innocent image, she had always been much closer to the promiscuous Nell Gwynn than to the squeaky-clean branding of other actresses like the young Hannah Pritchard.

Forced from willful women and travestie into the role of the penitent whore, Mrs. Jordan was understood once more by her audience in a way that endeared her to them. No longer the paradoxical breeches and travestie performer, she was the reckless mother returned. Wahrman notes of her homecoming after her disengagement from the Duke:

The late-eighteenth-century critics sounded the tocsin, their enthusiasm for Jordan in breeches noticeably cooling. Thus, one unfavorable reviewer dismissed a breeches part of hers in 1788 as “offensive and disgusting”, while a year later a better-disposed colleague gave her a backhanded compliment for appearing “chaste and natural... in spite of the disadvantage of appearing in a male dress.” Audiences were becoming less appreciative as well: in 1789 Jordan’s Wildair met “not with the violent applause she was then accustomed to”, from a provincial audience reportedly less able to stomach this character “when represented by a female.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Wahrman, 53.

When she returned to the stage in 1812, her fight was still in her but she had lost her spark and much of her visual appeal. She was much older now and her body showed the signs of her multiple pregnancies. She was a matron, no longer a maid. Her legs were still long, but they were full-figured rather than trim and toned. Her hair was still curled, but it had lost much of its luster, color, and shape with age. Mrs. Jordan was no longer Sir Harry Wildair nor was she Little Pickle. She was a fallen woman, a tragic figure of an actress who had always been better in comedies.

Upon returning to the stage (this time at Covent Garden) after being so suddenly and rudely dismissed from the Duke's bed, Mrs. Jordan only performed traditional female roles, with the rare occurrence of playing a small breeches part for the benefit of another actor. Even in these moments, she was forced to remind her audiences at the beginning of each play that she was indeed a woman in men's clothes upon the stage. One such prologue can be seen here:

To prevent disappointment, but not to forestall,  
To one little hint your attention we call:  
For this 'tis but right we should tell of his plan—  
You must fancy a female is really a man;  
Not merely conceal'd in the manly array,  
But a man, bona-fide, throughout the whole play;  
This we own, as it else might your feelings perplex,  
Since she charms you so much in her own proper sex.<sup>48</sup>

This prologue for *The British Muse* was written specifically for Mrs. Jordan to speak before the play's performance. It is unknown whether she asked for the piece to be written to safeguard her own faltering image or if the playwright wrote it to clear himself of any negative connections to the waning popularity of Mrs. Jordan's travestie and breeches roles.

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<sup>48</sup> Wahrman, 53.

Either way, Mrs. Jordan avoided donning her trousers, I believe, in an attempt to salvage as much of her reputation as possible after such a public and embarrassing break up. After spending twenty years with the Duke and bearing him ten children, to be thrown back to the stage as her only means of income was difficult.<sup>49</sup> She was no longer a young woman. Her curls were beginning to gray and her curves had shifted from trim femininity to those of a mother. The earlier unkind cartoons of Gillray and Cruikshank highlighted more than her public disgrace, they also immortalized her changing and aging physical form. As noted by biographer and historian Edward Robins, Mrs. Jordan now “displayed a growing plumpness of limb that was more healthy than alluring.”<sup>50</sup> An unnamed critic quotes by Jerrold in her autobiography of Mrs. Jordan claims that the aging actress should “take a hint... and begin to think of suiting her characters to her form and age,” claiming that “the converse is a dangerous trial.”<sup>51</sup> Without her figure to help her perform her breeches and travestie roles to popular success, Mrs. Jordan was left without so much of the roles that made up her repertoire.

Forced to perform conventional female roles in her skirts and petticoats, Mrs. Jordan was left with very few money-making parts. Still holding on to her comedic timing, she continued to perform comic heroines to the best of her abilities. But travesties and breeches roles had been her bread and butter. When she was denied access to those roles due to her new public image and to the physical signs of aging, she found herself unable to support herself financially. Forced to take out loans while performing when she could, Mrs. Jordan’s financials suddenly became eerily reminiscent of her own mother’s

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs. Jordan would have fourteen children in total; one with Daly, three with Ford, and ten with the Duke of Clarence. Each of her children would eventually make aristocratic marriages.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Robins. *Twelve Great Actresses*. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1900. 225.

<sup>51</sup> Jerrold, 269-270.

finances after being left by her father. But, unlike how the young Dora had been able to assist Mrs. Bland monetarily by beginning to work in shops and on the stage, Mrs. Jordan's children were mostly unaware of her failing finances and were unable to help her. When she learned of the enormous debts she had incurred due to her faltering career, Mrs. Jordan was forced to flee to France to escape the reach of her hounding creditors. It was there that she died, poverty stricken, forgotten by her fickle audience, and without the company of her much beloved children.

Although her body was buried in France, iconography of her in her prime continued to be made. After dismissing Mrs. Jordan from his side, the Duke began commissioning and collecting paintings and engravings of his once lover. When he became King William IV in 1830, one of his first actions was to hire the famous sculptor Sir Francis Chantrey to create a sculpture of Mrs. Jordan. According to Tomalin, "King William wept as he explained to Chantrey what he had in mind."<sup>52</sup> While it is nearly impossible to verify the truth of King William's tears, the fact remains that fifteen years after her own death, he commissioned a life-size marble statue of Mrs. Jordan. Working from portraits supplied by the Duke of his late lover, Chantrey set to work. The statue shows Mrs. Jordan seated on a plain block with her bare feet out and her ankles crossed demurely beneath a floor-length swath of fabric. Her knees are apart and her head is bent forward, looking down with a sincere smile upon one of her curly haired sons in her arms. Another young curly haired son, approximately two years old, stands next to her hip, with his head resting on his arms laid upon her thigh. With her loose curls about her face and tied back behind her neck, she sits calmly about to offer her breast to the infant

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<sup>52</sup> Tomalin, 2.



in her arms. Beside her sits a comic mask and a small flute, signifying her theatrical and musical abilities.

Under the title “Mrs Jordans Monument,” Chantrey’s ledger reads as follows: “Recd an order from His Majesty William IV to create a Monumental Groupe in memory of Mrs Jordan to be erected in Westminster Abbey beside the monuments of Queens.”<sup>53</sup> The statue was completed in the summer of 1834, almost four years after the original commission date. Unfortunately for William, the Dean of Westminster at the time would not allow him to place the monument to Mrs. Jordan within the Abbey, let alone alongside the statues of previous queens.<sup>54</sup> The statue remained in Chantrey’s workshop until the artist’s death in 1841. It was at this time that one of her sons, the Reverend Lord

Augustus FitzClarence, would have the statue crated and carted off by boat to his own parish in Mapledurham. It was placed in the church there and forgotten once more after his own death. It wasn’t until the fourth Earl, the great-grandson of Mrs. Jordan, discovered the whereabouts of the statue in 1904 that she was seen again. She was displayed in the Royal Academy in 1956 and bequeathed to the Queen in 1975. As Tomalin suggests, “Her Majesty was pleased to accept the bequest, and in May 1980

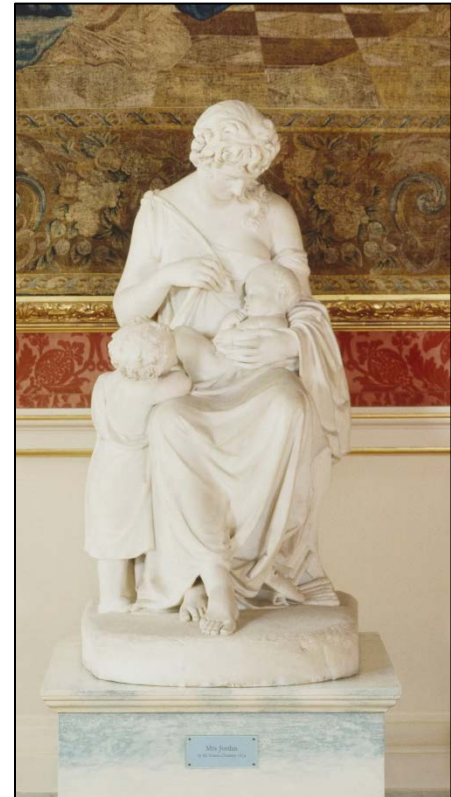


Figure 15: Dora Jordan sculpture commissioned by Duke of Clarence. Courtesy of the Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018.

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<sup>53</sup> Tomalin, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 3.



Mrs. Jordan was brought to Buckingham Palace and given a royal welcome. There she now sits in splendor, with two of her sons, among the tall portraits of the kings and queens.”<sup>55</sup> After living an entire life of uncertainty, Mrs. Dora Jordan, the comic muse and the mistress of the man who would be King, was finally brought to rest in a place of royalty.

### *Conclusions*

Beginning her stage career at the financial behest of her family, Mrs. Dora Jordan’s career was always connected to the welfare of her children. After unintentionally becoming pregnant at an early age, she took on a new name to clear her reputation before making herself known in the London theatre scene as a popular breeches and travestie actress. Crafting an image of the comic muse, Mrs. Jordan used her iconographic representations of the period to brand herself. She was seen by her public as a willful woman with a quick wit and a charming smile. She was feminine and boyish in her performances, non-threatening to the social understandings of gender at the time. But performing in travestie was not simply about comedy or tragedy or the gender fluctuations of the eighteenth-century. The genre relied heavily on the physical form of the actress playing the part. Long, lean legs and wide hips encased in men’s breeches created a vision of the ideal feminine shape of the period. Mrs. Jordan’s curls engaged the audience in their entangled mass while her trim thighs were the subject of sculptors. She used such artist appeal to uphold her decorous public image.

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<sup>55</sup> Tomalin, 320.

When she earned the love of the Duke of Clarence through her travestie performance of Little Pickle, she became one of the most important political figures of the period. Her advice was held dear and often put to use in public affairs. This power in the hands of an illegitimate upstart actress was unacceptable to much of the London public. Her image was shattered by the satirical cartoons of the period, shifting her iconographic representations from the youthful comic muse in breeches to the monstrous, manipulative matron. After spending nearly twenty years in the company of the Duke, battling the iconography of her new life, Mrs. Jordan's life underwent a drastic and surprising change. Left at the altar that was never going to be an option for her, Mrs. Jordan was forced to return to the stage and leave her duties as royal mistress behind.

But when the vestiges of age and childbirth begun to change her feminine form, she was unable to regain public acceptance as a travestie performer. Donning pants at her advanced age was not only improper and unappealing, it was also mildly offensive to their gender. Her comic timing was only heightened by the visual appeal of her tight curls and trim legs. The iconography of Mrs. Jordan highlights her physically attractive form, especially when costumed as a man on stage. She was left to perform traditional female roles, crafting a new brand for herself as the penitent whore. Paintings of Mrs. Jordan highlighted her newfound modesty and she was memorialized in statue as a loving mother. But, without her abilities or sensibilities to perform travestie and breeches roles anymore, her career never fully recovered.

## EPILOGUE

The theatrical genre of travestie performance has gone through many iterations since its inception. Beginning with *castrati* and *travesti* performances in the Italian opera, the stage convention of women playing men onstage was a necessity. After *castrati* were no longer seen as viable or moral additions to society, opera was forced to allow sopranos to perform traditionally male roles purely due to their higher vocal ranges. When *travesti* performance imported from Italy to England, necessity was no longer the motive.

Travestie performance was, instead, a complex phenomenon on the eighteenth-century English stage that questioned and presented the complicated interweaving of normative gender roles, gender identity, and gender representation. Despite a history of boys performing female roles throughout most Western theatre history, the performance of masculinity by actresses was a visual representation of gender fluidity that enticed and challenged the social dynamics of the period. It questioned gender normative actions and ideals, placing masculine power and agency in the hands of actresses playing men on stage. Through their travestie performances, women's voices were suddenly much louder and more professional. Travestie actresses became dynamic parts of the theatrical landscape.

Travestie actresses were business women, plain and simple. Business savvy and sexy theatrical entrepreneurs, they knew the paradoxical paradigm their performances resided within. Appealing to all audience members through flirtations and power, they were cheered and feared. Performing masculine roles gave them a level of professionalization within the theatrical landscape but it also placed them in direct

opposition to the prescribed gender roles of the period. Entertaining the fluidity of gender representation and identity that was beginning to be embraced by the end of the eighteenth-century, travestie actresses of the London public stage performed in a state of undress through cross-dress. Their breeches signified their masculinity (and the power associated with it) as well as their femininity (with a focus on the visible curves of their female form). Muses in their form and monstrous in their gendered contradictions, actresses purposefully used the performance genre of travestie to their career and financial advantage.

### *From Breeches to Burlesque*

Over the course of time, the meaning of travestie has shifted. It no longer refers to the powerful performances by women like Miss Woffington, Mrs. Charke, and Mrs. Jordan. Instead, travestie (or more often now *travesty*) refers to a comical caricature, costuming oneself to appear ridiculous or grotesque.<sup>1</sup> When the actresses of the eighteenth-century first attempted travestie performance, it may have been understood as comical, but it was not intended as burlesque. In a period where women conventionally wore skirts and petticoats in public, wearing men's breeches was a risky business.<sup>2</sup> It was a complex performance phenomenon that gave power and agency to women. Capitalizing on such vision, travestie actresses presented themselves in states of undress that were considered unacceptable in other public spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> "travestie, adj. and n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/205300?rskey=69C9Y2&result=1> (accessed July 13, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> This is not to be confused with wearing silk pants that were designed for women when travelling abroad in warmer climates or when the Chinese craze hit London high society and silk trousers became fashionable for women to wear (not on a daily basis).

Travestie performance did not end with the death of Mrs. Jordan. There were numerous other performers who took up the mantle of masculinity signified by male breeches on stage. The famed tragic muse, Sarah Siddons, attempted travestie later in her own career. Though her costumes for the performance cloaked her figure in massive, draping swaths of fabric to deny any view of her physical form within her breeches, Mrs. Siddons's performances of Hamlet began the turn in travestie performance to the work of the bard. Mrs. Siddons decision to perform classical plays and parts in travestie was a push to continue professionalizing actress careers through travestie performance. She proved that tragic travestie was possible, but only if the character was morally sound, sexually impotent, and from an acceptable Shakespearean play. Any attempts at tragic travestie outside of these conditions continued to fail. Travestie was still representative of a social conundrum; it was a visual presentation of gender as non-binary with great socially subversive and financial potential.

Connecting travestie to lowbrow comedy kept it within the bounds of frivolous entertainment. When a travestie actress performed a tragic role, it was necessary that the character she portrayed remained strictly within the boundaries of feminine etiquette. Characters like Hamlet and Romeo were the most popular tragic travestie roles of the nineteenth century. Such roles performed in travestie highlighted their youth, vulnerability, and indecisiveness as feminine qualities. Although both characters do commit murder, they are repentant in the final moments of the play, similar to the penitent whore archetype of the eighteenth-century. Furthermore, performing a classic Shakespearean part in travestie began to hold career clout. To perform the bard was to showcase an actor's supreme performance abilities. Due to David Garrick's placement of

Shakespeare on a social and artistic pedestal, actors and actresses were considered more accomplished if they were able to successfully perform Shakespeare. And with so few female heroines in Shakespeare's tragedies, actresses began to claim certain male roles for themselves.

This new tradition continued into the nineteenth and through the early twentieth centuries. Times were changing and the tastes of English audiences began to waver. With waxing and waning feelings towards travestie performance, actresses had to find ways of capitalizing on the shifting sands of public opinion. With the death of King William IV (the old Duke of Clarence) in 1837, the young Queen Victoria took control of the United Kingdom. She was a woman in control, much like Queen Elizabeth I long before her. Eighteen years old and running a country on her own, Queen Victoria was forced by feminine propriety and financial necessity to continue living with her overbearing mother until she got married.

Despite being the most powerful person in all of England, she was still a woman and there were gender norms that she was expected to obey. Queen Victoria eventually married Prince Albert to comply with Victorian female etiquette, but she still ruled England with Albert as an advisor more than a co-ruler. Travestie actresses were no different; they were complex creatures of multiple genders, wielding the power of masculinity alongside the vulnerability of femininity. They lived in the liminal space between the binaries, questioning gender norms. Like their queen, travestie actresses often attempted to perform the duties prescribed by social norms in their daily lives while simultaneously subverting those norms in their careers.

Learning from the actresses who came before them, this new set of travestie actresses chose parts that were comedic and non-threatening to perform in men's clothes. Many chose to stick with familiar comic travestie roles, Sir Harry Wildair being the most popular throughout both centuries. Captain Macheath was another common staple for new travestie actresses. Some followed Mrs. Siddons into the realm of tragic Shakespearean travestie performance, making Hamlet and Romeo their own. Women like Sarah Bernhardt, Charlotte Cushman, Maude Adams, and Adah Issacs Menken took pages from Mrs. Charke's *Narrative*, crafting their images around their travestie performances. Bernhardt, a French actress who travelled the world throughout her stunning career, was best known for her Hamlet. Charlotte Cushman was an American actress and early lesbian icon, known for performing various Shakespeare heroes to great acclaim (especially playing Romeo to her sister Susan Webb Cushman's Juliet). Maude Adams, an American actress, was the first to perform a leading role in travestie on Broadway, playing the titular character in *Peter Pan* in 1905. Adah Issacs Menken, another American actress, painter, and poet, was one of the highest paid actresses in her day. She used her portrayals of men on stage to craft her onstage persona: an androgynous bohemian whose multiple amorous relationships were fodder for the many gossip columnists of the period.

But the branches of travestie performance began to split and grow in other directions as well. Beginning in the 1860s, the convention of burlesque took hold of the popular theatrical stage. Travestie actresses, already comfortable in their revealing breeches, would often also perform in this new type of theatrical genre. Taking on a variety show format, these performances were a twist on theatre, showcasing talents that

were not limited solely to acting. Some burlesques even included minor stripteases, reminiscent of the undress and flirtations of the travestie actresses of the eighteenth-century. Though the performers rarely stripped down past their bloomers, the sexual thrill of the performance itself remained.<sup>3</sup> A combination of breeches and travestie roles, burlesque performers wore their skirts on to the stage, stripped down to their breeches with a coy wink and a teasing smile, and left the stage without returning to their skirts. Victorian burlesques also took the form of musical theatre parodies, mocking traditional theatre and opera conventions (much as *The Beggar's Opera* and the popular travestie role of Captain Macheath had done the century before). Risqué in style and mocking in theme, these theatrical performances were sometimes nicknamed travesties or extravaganzas. The tradition of travestie performance in Victorian burlesque is still seen in the popularity of gender reversals and musical parody. Some burlesques used this sexual freedom for titillation, others used it to distance the audience from the morality of the play being satirized.<sup>4</sup>

It was around this same period when the definition of travestie began to shift dramatically. Travestie no longer referred to a woman performing a male character on stage. Swapping the outdated *ie* for a *y*, travesty is now understood in two ways: as a comedic parody or burlesque, or as a mocking caricature with ridiculous and derisive connotations. While the delights of the burlesque continued to push gender boundaries through the conventional genre of eighteenth-century travestie, the immoral undertones of these performances elicited a split connotation in the new definition. Travesty was now

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<sup>3</sup> Maria-Elena Buszek. "Representing 'Awarishness': Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19th-Century Pin-up," *The Drama Review*. Vol. 43, Issue 4, 1999. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Edith Hall. "Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Culture," *International Journal of the Classic Tradition*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 1999. 342.



a more obvious subject of moral and social debate. To perform a travesty role was to address the liminal space between the gender binaries created by society. And while some modern audiences found that enlightening and exciting, others found it demoralizing and regressive.

Travesty today is often thought of in the second connotation; negatively recreating ridiculous caricatures of social realities for satirical or political effect. Most often used in connection with justice, travesty is better understood now as a distorted imitation of something important to social understandings of self or community. This new definition hinges on the sinister nature of disguises; seeing them instead as accessories for lying, cheating, and performing other such nefarious tasks. The nature of travestie/y shifts over time, losing the original playful nature of disguise and eliminating the socially subversive potential of such gendered masquerade.

### *Remembering Travestie*

As this chapter of my life and this dissertation comes to a close, I find myself reflecting on the lives of Miss Woffington, Mrs. Charke, and Mrs. Jordan in connection to my own. Strong, defiant, confident, and androgynous, these women defied the gender norms that had been placed upon them. I look up to these women. I want to be these women. And yet here I sit, a fragile female cog in a patriarchal academic machine. I aim to take the lessons I have learned from these women and do my best to shake up the system I am complicit within. Perhaps I won't perform a traditional travestie role in the process, but I believe that I can bring forth the subversive potential within myself nonetheless. Using their strength as a guide, this dissertation is only the first step in

recalling, reclaiming, and reinterpreting the agency of women in theatre history. Their voices are out there, and I, for one, am going to make sure I'm listening.

## APPENDIX

“Pretty Peggy”<sup>1</sup>

Once more I'll tune my vocal shell,  
To hills and dales my Passion tell,  
A Flame which time can never quell  
That burns for lovely Peggy.

Yet greater Bards the Lyre should hit;  
For pray, what Subject is more fit,  
Than to record the radiant wit  
And bloom of lovely Peggy?

The Sun, first rising in the morn,  
That paints the dew-bespangled Thorn,  
Doth not so much the day adorn  
As does my lovely Peggy.

And when in Thetis' lap to rest,  
He streaks with gold the ruddy west,  
He's not so beauteous, as undrest  
Appears my lovely Peggy.

Were she Arrayed in rustic weed,  
With her the Bleating flocks I'd feed,  
And pipe upon my Oaten reed,  
To please my lovely Peggy.

With her a Cottage would delight,  
All pleases when she's in my sight!  
But when she's gone, 'Tis endless  
Night—  
All's dark without my Peggy.

When Zephyr on the violet Blows,  
Or breathes upon the damask rose,  
He does not half the sweets disclose  
That does my lovely Peggy.

I stole a kiss the other day,  
And trust me, Naught by Truth I say,  
The fragrant breath of blooming May  
Was not so sweet as Peggy.

While bees from Flowers to Flowers  
rove,  
And Linnets warble through the Grove,  
Or Stately swans the waters love,  
So long shall I love Peggy.

And when Death, with his Pointed Dart,  
Shall strike the blow that rends my heart,  
My words shall be when I depart,  
Adieu, my lovely Peggy.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, 174-5. Daly acknowledges that the original author is unknown and that the piece is most often prescribed to either Garrick or Hanbury Williams (34-5).

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