STAGING THE ACTRESS:
DRAMATIC CHARACTER AND THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE IDENTITY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2014

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ABSTRACT

Since women first took to the professional stage, actresses have been objects of admiration and condemnation as well as desire and suspicion. Historically marginalized figures, actresses challenged notions of acceptable female behavior by, among other (more scandalous) things, earning their own income, cultivating celebrity, and being sexually autonomous. Performance entailed an economic transaction of money for services provided, inviting the sexual double meanings of female “entertainer” and “working” woman. Branding the actress a whore not only signaled her (perceived) sexual availability, but also that she was an unruly woman who lived beyond the pale. The history of the actress in the West is also complicated by the tradition of the all-male stage, which long prevented women from participating in their own dramatic representations and devalued their claim to artistry once they did.

Theatrical representations of actresses necessarily engage with cultural perceptions of actresses, which historically have been paradoxical at best. In this dissertation I identify a sub-genre of drama that I call actress-plays, and using this bibliography of over 100 titles I chronicle and analyze the actress as a character type in the English-speaking theatre, arguing that dramatizations of the professional actress not only reflect (and fuel) a cultural fascination with actresses but also enact a counter-narrative to conventional constructions of femininity. Using the advent of the actress in
the Restoration as a historical touchstone, this study weaves together theatre and
women’s history, literary criticism, and cultural studies to analyze the ways in which
staging the actress highlights and interrogates the complex and layered nature of
gendered prejudice that has historically marginalized actresses and thwarted female
progress. This dissertation features in-depth examinations of key actress-plays from
different eras, including but not limited to J. Palgrave Simpson’s *World and Stage* (1859),
Christopher St. John’s *The First Actress* (1911), Sophie Treadwell’s *O Nightingale*
(1925), and April De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* (1993). In this study I demonstrate
how the actress character functions as a critical intervention, one that speaks from a
necessarily marginalized position, performing and making visible female experience,
while charting and questioning its own history of representation. The actress character
represents a new and rich approach to history, women, and performance that underscores
as well as enacts the importance of female self-expression and self-determination amid
constantly evolving public images of women.
For Sydney and her grandmother Ellen
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my advisor and mentor Lesley Ferris for her dedication, patience, and enthusiasm for this project. I would be lost without her example, not only as a scholar but as a woman in the theatre. I am truly indebted to her, and cannot thank her enough for her generosity and guidance.

I also wish to thank Beth Kattelman for her keen eye, her unwavering moral support, and for many great laughs along the way. And last but not least, I would like to thank Jen Schluetter for answering the call and coming on board, for her critical insight, and for helping to get this project across the finish line.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my Columbus family. Thank yous go out to Vic Shonk for keeping me sane; to Jirye Lee for keeping me company; to Mina Choi who kept us all in line; and finally to Ian Bradford Ngongotaha Pugh who was often tasked with my care and feeding during this journey.

And finally to the Lee men in my life—Zachary and Jacob who just plain make me very happy.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

And it was a necessary condition of the successful hegemonic control of the theatre . . . that women’s work within the public space should be disguised, discounted or appropriated to male control; and therefore entertainment, embodied as female, became the Other of the “National Drama” of male genius.

-Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*¹

Scholarly consensus has identified the when and where of the event that forever changed the composition of the English stage: the inclusion of women performers in the public theatre. On 8 December 1660 the newly patented King’s Company headed by playwright-manager Thomas Killigrew performed William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello* at Gibbons’s Tennis Court Theatre in Vere Street; and in this production the role of Desdemona was acted by a woman. What remains a mystery in this historiography is the who. The short list of women for the title of First English Actress includes Margaret Hughes and Anne Marshall.² But it is likely we will never know definitively who was on the stage that December day. In the story of the actress it is perhaps telling that the identity of the woman who was the first to breach this hitherto exclusively male profession has been lost to us. All we do know with certainty is that she was there, physically present on the royally commissioned commercial stage, representing the
female gender not only though her performance of the fictional Desdemona, but by simply being herself, a bona fide member of the female sex.

Lest our woman-performed Desdemona cheat her audience in the same manner that she is accused of deceiving her father and her husband to tragic consequences in the play, Thomas Jordan’s prologue to this historic production sets the record straight, titillating the audience with the appearance of a woman on a public stage by dispelling doubts as to her realness:

I come, unknown to any of the rest
To tell you news, I saw the lady drest;
The woman playes today, mistake me not,
No man in gown, or page in petticoat;
A woman to my knowledge; yet I cann’t,
(If I should dye) make affidavit on’t.
Do you not twitter, gentlemen?  

Because the female gender had so long been counterfeited on British stages, the prologue attempts to satisfy savvy theatre-going gentlemen that under the feminine costume there exists an actual biological woman as advertised. Even though the male speaker of the prologue assures his audience that he witnessed the actress dressing backstage, he issues a caveat, intimating that without experiencing the sexual act itself he is unwilling to swear to her genitalia, an innocent enough joke but one that is squarely at the expense of professional theatre women. Here, Jordan seems to be working against himself, for the prologue also takes up the question of female virtue, defending the actress while acknowledging that public opinion may be unfairly against her: “I know / You will be censuring, do’t fairly though; / ‘Tis possible a vertuous woman may / Abhor all sorts of looseness, and yet play.” He goes so far as to point out that French theatre tradition
celebrates rather than condemns its actresses, suggesting that England should do the same. Jordan’s prologue also touts the advantages of women performers, pointing out how the convention of the male-actress creates “defective” women “so siz’d / You’d think they were some of the guard disguis’d; . . . With bone so large and nerve so incompliant, / When you call Desdemona, enter Giant.” The first English actresses may have saved the public from temperamentally incompliant women and unsightly female giants, but despite Jordan’s instruction, she was not treated fairly, nor did she escape the public’s censure.

On 3 January 1661, only weeks after an actress trod the boards as Desdemona at the Vere Street Theatre in Clare Market, Samuel Pepys remarked on a production of Beggars’ Bush given at this same venue, which was “very well done; and here the first time that ever I saw Women come upon the stage.” In his 1958 book All the King’s Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration, one of the first scholarly histories dedicated to the actress, John Harold Wilson begins by weaving a narrative inspired by this anecdote from Pepys’s diary. Wilson details Pepys’s sojourn through narrow streets to Lincoln Inn Fields, imagining how he “pulled up before the playhouse.” Wilson paints a picture that emphasizes the bawdiness of the Restoration theatre: “At the door he paid a half-crown admission and entered. The shadowy theatre was already half-filled with men, with a few ladies in the side boxes and here and there in the pit a gaily dressed trollop flaunting a vizard, the sign of her trade.” He calls Pepys’s experience of actresses that night his “first glimpse into a brave new world,” but carefully notes that actresses had already made their first appearance on the stage, commenting that Pepys “was more than a little
behind the times.”⁹ Even so, Wilson does not seem bothered by the fact that the reliable Pepys, avid admirer of theatre and its artists, failed to record the name of a single actress from the first production he attended in the New Year 1661, an oversight which once again deprives us of the who in the story of the earliest actresses. Pepys’s diary entry provides a very matter-of-fact accounting of the day’s activities, noting that he dined with Jack Spicer on roasted leg of pork at Will’s Tavern, the meal seemingly merited a little more detail than his first experience of women on the stage. That Pepys did not bother to mention an actress by name is perhaps a fitting anonymity, symptomatic of the vexed history of the professional actress, a history characterized by absence, omission, and prejudice.

Owing to and despite this troubled narrative, the actress has been the object of admiration and condemnation as well as desire and suspicion since she first trod the boards. Historically marginalized figures, actresses challenged notions of acceptable female behavior by, among other (more scandalous) things, earning their own income, cultivating celebrity, and being sexually autonomous. The history of the actress in the West is also complicated by the tradition of the all-male stage, which long prevented women from participating in their own dramatic representations, and devalued their claim to artistry once they did. Using the advent of actresses in the English Restoration as a historical touchstone, this dissertation examines the character (part or role) of the actress in the English-speaking theatre, fictional actress characters as well as those based on historical actresses, focusing on how these theatrical representations of the actress mirror, inform, or defy conventional constructions of femaleness. As a corollary to this line of
inquiry, this study also puts forth a bibliography of English language plays that stage the actress character, arguing that this overlooked dramatic archive, through its foregrounding of women’s work and subjectivity, serves as a platform from which actresses “can speak for and from the margins,” and women resist hegemonic control of the theatre.

**The historical absence of the actress**

First, precisely because Western theater’s originary mimetic activity was female impersonation, acting is bound up with “femininity.” And second, because patriarchal culture has sustained an ideal of the artificial, malleable, and changeable woman, “femininity” is bound up with acting.


In *Feminism and Theatre* (1988), Sue-Ellen Case states that the absence of the female body on the Elizabethan stage was the result of a complex set of “cultural codes and practices.” Indeed, as far as we know there was no legal prohibition against actresses in early modern England. Such a lack of evidence reinforces the idea that the culture (and profession) policed itself to keep women off the stage. But, as Natasha Korda has pointed out, there is a seeming dichotomy of absence and presence regarding women in the theatre. Scholarship that focuses on the exclusion of the actress in the Elizabethan period paints a specific picture of a male-dominated profession. And while this characterization is not inaccurate—it is a fact that professional women players did not exist—this approach runs the risk of discounting altogether the contributions of non-performing women to the profession, women who remained “behind the scenes” and provided a type of labor and contribution that, like domestic work, has historically
remained largely invisible in the economy of theatre. In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that the conventional view of the commercial theatre in periods such as early modern Europe is necessarily an incomplete history as regards women’s contributions. The challenge of interpreting the past is not limited to uncovering the contributions of women in theatre, but Korda’s dichotomy of female absence and presence is a reminder that the same set of evidence can yield different, even contradictory, results. Her recent essay “Women in the Theatre”\textsuperscript{13} represents the current trend in theatre historiography to rehabilitate female presence by challenging certain paradigms that have failed to recognize women’s offstage labor. That being said, this study’s focus on staging the actress is very much concerned with this glaring history of absence and exclusion of women on the stage.

While theatre women work to be written back into a history that has largely overlooked them, the actress presents an ontological conundrum, for the earliest form of conventional Western theatre did not conceive of women players, so that the practice itself was an explicit, systemic, and self-sustaining refutation of the actress’s value, even while woman was from its beginnings a central subject of mimesis. With its roots in Classical Greek practice, the Western theatre inherited an all-male performance tradition based on the required participation of citizens in annual dramatic festival competitions. Since Greek laws restricted citizenship to free men, women were effectively preempted from any form of legitimate participation in the art. In her book *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (1990), Lesley Ferris interrogates the historical absence of the actress and argues that the ancient Greek performance convention of cross-dressed men masked
as female characters effectively created a theatrical “sign called ‘woman,’” which could be “worn and discarded like a costume, a dress, make-up, a gesture.”\textsuperscript{14} Such a mimetic semiotic not only reduced woman into (in Ferris’s words) “a disposable sign,” but culturally disempowered the actress as an artist once she did come onto the scene.

In early modern England, the legacy of drag performance by men and especially boys again rendered the actress unnecessary and reinscribed the “sign” of woman. The suggestion of femininity, rather than its embodiment, was all that was necessary to fulfill the requirements of performance: the androgynous quality of preadolescent boys with unbroken voices, slight frames, and smooth skin was exploited for the stage— their presence signaled “real” woman and reified rather than disrupted the hegemony of masculinity. In Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage (2000), Dympna Callaghan asserts that “the all-male theatre did not eradicate difference but simply produced it within a visibly homogeneous economy of gender.”\textsuperscript{15} Such a harmonious subjugation of gender difference was codified by feminine costume, makeup, wigs, and other accouterment that did not necessarily create an unqualified substitution of boys for girls, but promoted the notion that even though physically absent “woman” could still be adequately represented by being conceptually present. That men could create and control this female stage illusion to great dramatic effect was a testament to male artistic genius and helped to secure a male claim to the job of actress on top of that of actor, once again reinforcing that women were superfluous to the acting profession. Further, when women were finally given royal leave to tread the boards alongside men, this theatrical semiotic precedent worked against the woman
actress: in Ferris’s words, “a symbol could not generate another symbol.”

Instead, a prejudice that refused to credit women with the talent to act filled this semiotic void, so that the actress was thought incapable of creating a character that could be seen as distinct from herself. In other words, women characters require no more from actresses than to be what they already are: women. In acting a female character a male actor demonstrated careful study and great skill, but the same is not true when a woman actress acted a female character—here reductive logic and cultural prejudices combine to deny any feat of artistry: it was obvious that when a woman played there was no divide between performer and part, and thus no artistic challenge in the first place. Through their convincing portrayals of female characters, male actors displayed their virtuosity on public stages; on the other hand, the exclusion of women from participation even in their own aesthetic representation established the prejudice that women are not cultural creators.

Christian condemnation of theatre and women

Clearly, the whole complex of theater, dance, music, gorgeous attire, luxurious diet, cosmetics, feminine seductiveness, feminine sexuality, transvestism, etc., aroused a painful anxiety in the foes of the stage, perhaps not only because it symbolized irrational forces threatening chaos, but because it represented a deeply disturbing temptation, which could only be dealt with by being disowned and converted into a passionate moral outrage.

-Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*  

Theatrical practice and intolerance to such practice have doubtless always gone hand-in-hand. An antitheatrical prejudice can be traced back to the earliest known
writings on theatre—we only need remember that Plato called for the banishment of poets from his ideal republic in order to eliminate the “threat” drama posed to the well-being of an impressionable audience. In The Antitheatrical Prejudice (1981) Jonas Barish provides a sweeping and incisive historical survey of the institutionalized denunciation of theatre; moreover, he illuminates the deeply-rooted connection between antitheatrical attitudes and antifeminism. He demonstrates how, in its puritanical offensive against theatre and its practitioners, early Christian teachings propagated and leveraged an established sexual bias against performing women, which lent authority to the stigmatizing of the actress as morally suspect and sexually depraved. For example, in De spectaculis, Tertullian’s unforgiving censure of spectacle and performance, Barish finds an early instance of a long-lasting motif: prejudice against the theatre coupled with prejudice against women, especially beautiful, ornamental, and seductive women. . . . As the theatre is suspected of ill designs for its attractiveness, so are women. As the theatre debases by its counterfeiting, so do women who affect a beauty not theirs by nature. God has given them one face, and they make themselves another, just as he has given men one identity and they arrogate to themselves another when they pretend to what they are not in a play.18

Ironically, the artifice of theatre was a perfect frame for understanding women as mutable and naturally duplicitous creatures, and thus both the performances of the stage as well as those of femininity were suspect for their facility for deception. The Christian notion of an absolute God-given identity was linked to the bizarre idea that modesty and beauty were mutually exclusive in women, “for, where modesty exists there is no need for beauty.”19 In his treatise, Tertullian decries the use of cosmetics and jewelry, considering all attempts of women to adorn themselves a denial of one’s essential identity, an insult to God, a courting of the Devil even. By applying product to her face, a woman
manufactures a beauty that is not naturally hers, daring to suggest that God’s work can be improved upon. Additionally, scripture reinforced that a woman’s virtue could be known by looking at her: “The whoredom of a woman may be known in her haughty looks and eyelids” (Ecclesiastics 26:9). Women’s malleability signaled an essential hypocrisy, one that equated female performance with female transgression. For the actress whose job it is to transform herself within a fiction staged for public consumption, this underlying moral stigma perpetuated by religious doctrine and a patriarchal culture hindered her professional trajectory: the actress was a wicked woman who could deceive by presenting an alternate face to the public. On the other hand, the notion that women were naturally two-faced also worked against understanding the actress as a skilled performer. Instead, women’s “natural” inclination toward artifice collapsed theatre’s mimetic system, eliminating any aesthetic distance between life and art, so that the actress was not a skilled professional at all; indeed, her art was no more than the art of every woman.

While early Christian dogma rails against the theatre, in the sixteenth century religious authorities made a move against performing women that “indicates a shift in the attitude of the Church to secular theatre: it moves from a condemnation of the whole profession to a much more specific and targeted essentially misogynistic censorship of actresses.”\(^\text{20}\) In 1558, Pope Sextus V prohibited women from performing within the jurisdiction of the Papal States with an edict that remained in place for over two-hundred years. As Lesley Ferris points out, “Such censorship not only prevents already-established actresses from performing, but those who do act (outside the papal states) are labeled morally suspect.”\(^\text{21}\) This specific targeting of actresses suggests that the theatre
itself would be rendered tolerably acceptable once women are eliminated from the stage, which not only suggests degrees of sin and moral outrage, but a measure of hypocrisy in terms of the church’s offensive against the theatre. This move to ban women players, but not the theatre itself, calls attention to an historical irony, that organized religious worship likely played a crucial role in the reemergence of theatre after its virtual disappearance in the Middle Ages, a period during which the Bishop of Rome gained supremacy in religious as well as secular matters, the result of the political void left by the fall of the Roman Empire. The performance of Catholic ritual and liturgy gave rise to a formalized religious drama and eventually a vernacular drama of morality, miracle, and mystery plays. The theatre proved to be an effective way to engage a largely illiterate congregation in the celebration, dissemination, and reaffirmation of the Christian doctrine. The papal ban of actresses that stripped women off stages in 1558 but seemed unconcerned with theatrical activity itself appears to reinforce the idea that theatre had some redeeming value while women, on the other hand, did not; a reminder that drama was a one-time powerful tool of religious propaganda, a means by which the Catholic Church “Christianized” pagan religions and extended its reach and authority over its growing constituency. Such a targeted ban exemplifies not only a religious othering of women, but a specific scapegoating of actresses for the original but necessary evil of theatre, a calculated concession to Tertullian’s “Church of the Devil.”

In 1633 William Prynne published his Histriomastrix-the Player’s Scourge, or Actors Tragedie, a Christian denunciation of the stage wherein he rails against the very idea of the actress, a woman who dares “be so more then whorishly impudent, as to act,
to speak publicly on Stage (perchance in man’s apparel, and cut hair, here proved sinful
and abominable) in the presence of sundry men and women?”²² Because Henrietta Maria
had recently acted a speaking role in Walter Montague’s The Shepherd’s Paradise at
court, Prynne’s vilification of actresses as “notorious whores” was interpreted as a
deliberate and direct attack on England’s Catholic and French queen consort. As a result,
Prynne was tried and convicted of seditious libel. His punishment was severe. His ears were
cropped; he was fined, pilloried, and sentenced to life imprisonment. According to
Sophie Tomlinson the political scandal surrounding Henrietta Maria’s performance in
Montague’s masque “quickly turned female acting into a livewire issue”²³ and represents
a turning point in the debate over the actress. Tomlinson also offers that Henrietta Maria
might have inspired one of the earliest uses of the term “actress,” when years earlier in
1626 the new queen staged “a cultural intervention” at the English court by performing in
a French pastoral with her ladies, “for until this moment formal acting by women had not
been witnessed, either on the English public stage, or in court entertainments.”²⁴ In
reports of what Tomlinson calls Henrietta Maria’s “theatrical coup,” Sir Benjamin
Rudyard refers to the queen as “a principle actress.” According to Tomlinson, this is the
earliest use of the term “actress” employed to mean “a female player on the stage,” a
usage “that predates that given in the OED by exactly three-quarters of a century.”²⁵
Currently, however, the OED online cites 1608 as the first usage of “actress” in the
theatrical sense, which changes the timeline Tomlinson established in 1992, though this
does not diminish the significance that England’s queen is linked with one of the term’s
earliest known applications.²⁶ Indeed, the pastoral was a momentous occasion—Henrietta
Maria’s coming out party as sovereign to her adopted country, but done most decidedly in the French way. The young queen would continue to use performance and court theatricals to craft her public persona; and she would be a fervent patron of the arts during her reign. It is also worth noting that while the OED’s primary definition of “actress” is “[a] woman who acts a part on stage or (in later use) in a film, on television, etc.,” the word’s “extended use” is “a woman skilled in dissimulation,” which speaks to the motif that women have a natural facility for deception, and reflects and/or perpetuates a cultural preconception that turns every woman into an actress as well as reminds us that every actress is merely a woman.

In addition to regulating female dress and appearance, Church doctrine strictly prescribed female behavior, stressing the “natural” female virtues of silence, modesty, and obedience. Accordingly, a good woman was a silent woman, a closed mouth signaled not only humility and submission but her chastity. Prynne was distressed about the growing use of actresses in the seventeen century: “they have now their female-players in Italy, and other foreign parts—and in Michaelmas 1629 they had French women-actors in a play personated at Blackfriars, to which there was a great resort.” In Europe, the playing of female roles by women happened gradually but predates the appearance of the first regular actresses in England. Even though Italian, French, and Spanish women could be found performing alongside male actors from as early as the mid-sixteenth century, the European actress was by no means a free agent. Rather, her participation in the profession was determined by her familial ties to men. Most actresses were daughters in established theatre families, or gained access to the stage by being married to an actor, requirements
that were generally legally prescribed.\textsuperscript{28} But England completely eschewed this continental trend, and in 1629 the London audience was openly hostile to this performance by a mixed-sex French troupe. Puritan Thomas Brand recorded the “offensive” incident and his approbation of the audience’s hostility in a letter to Archbishop Laud: “Glad am I to say they were hissed, and pippin-pelted from the stage, so that I do not think they will soon be ready to try the same again.”\textsuperscript{29} That there are no extant records the French troupe needed special permission for their actresses to appear again seems to support the idea that female absence was an English stage convention rather than a legal prohibition. Regardless, the effect was the same: the exclusion of women from the stage.

\textbf{The actress makes her appearance}

The actress is in a practically unique position, since her claim to public notice and professional competence is based upon an inherited association of role-playing with female sexuality.

-Katharine Eisaman Maus, “‘Playhouse Flesh and Blood’: Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress”\textsuperscript{30}

In 1642, the Puritan-controlled English Parliament issued an ordinance suppressing all stage plays. Over the next eighteen years, while England fought a Civil War, Parliament would continue to dismantle what had been up to this point a thriving theatre industry, ordering the demolition of playhouses and the capture and punishment of actors. Upon the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, theatre practitioners were eager to return to business-as-usual. So not only does the actress make her appearance at a time when there was a great thirst for theatre, her debut is inextricably tied to a rebirth, after a
long and forced dormancy, of the industry as a whole, perhaps an appropriate irony in the vexed narrative of the actress.

The names of seven actresses were included on his original roster, when, in 1660, just weeks after the Restoration, Thomas Killigrew secured one of two royal warrants granting him permission to create a new playhouse and maintain a company of players, to be known as the King’s or His Majesty’s Servants. The other warrant was issued to William Davenant, who established his company under the sponsorship of the Duke of York. Because the warrants also suppressed the formation of any other theatrical enterprises, Killigrew and Davenant essentially oversaw a legally sanctioned theatre monopoly. Offering women on the stage was just one of many innovations the newly patented theatre companies implemented to please and entice patrons back to a modern, revitalized theatre. Indeed, though the use of actresses broke with tradition it seems this novelty was not met with much resistance. As Katherine Eisaman Maus has argued: “The new actresses were accepted almost immediately into the life of the theater, and there was surprisingly little controversy over their suitability for the stage.”

History, at least, does not record that any of Killigrew or Davenant’s actresses were pippin-pelted, or suffered similar indignities just for taking the stage, unlike the openly hostile reception the French actresses received in 1629. Clearly popular tastes had changed. Elizabeth Howe speculates that this is likely because “the Restoration theatre was more exclusively a court milieu than it had been in the Caroline period,” so that when the court returned from being exiled during the Interregnum it brought back with it a Continental taste for actresses, which influenced and paved the way for public tolerance at home. Finally, the
oft cited royal patent of 25 April 1662, revised from earlier versions dating back to 1660 when Killigrew first pursued his cause, provides documentation of this shift in theatre practice and attitudes from the highest possible authority. It decreed that not only were the two patent holders allowed to employ actresses, but that actresses should be used to act female parts in plays:

And for as much as many plays formerly acted do contain several profane, obscene and scurrilous passages, and the women’s parts therein have been acted by men in the habit of women, at which some have taken offence, for the preventing of these abuses for the future, we do hereby strictly command and enjoin that from henceforth . . . we do . . . permit and give leave that all the women’s parts to be acted in either of the said two companies for the time to come may be performed by women, so long as their recreations, which by reason of the abuses aforesaid were scandalous and offensive, may by such reformation be esteemed not only harmless delight, but useful and instructive representations of human life.  

This patent effectively put an end to the convention of the boy actress; the immensely popular Edward Kynaston, the “boy who outwomanned women” 35 was one of the last male actors of female roles. Notably, the patent goes to great lengths to justify its decree and is very candid about its purpose: this reformation of the stage is meant to improve its respectability and forestall criticism. To support the legitimacy of this claim, it boldly declares that the theatre serves two important functions: it is a source of harmless entertainment, and it provides insight into the human condition. Women players, then, were an improvement over the old ways of the English Renaissance theatre, implemented to make the staged reality of the theatre more real, and thus usher England into a new era.

In her study The Rise of the English Actress (1993), Sandra Richards reminds us that when the actress finally did come onto the scene, she did so alone, without a professional female precedent and “fettered with all the handicaps of the trade for
women.” 36 The newcomers had to fight for attention not only with the established male actors but with each other, and they had very little but their personalities to set themselves apart from the competition. In her 1992 study The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700, Elizabeth Howe classifies the Restoration “the age of performer’s theatre, as opposed to that of the dramatist or director: ‘it was the personal glamour of the players that secured attention, not the intrinsic quality of their repertory.'”37 In this milieu, the “intrinsic” qualities of the actress came to dominate the stage narrative; and it was her sexuality that set her apart, a quality that became fodder for performance. The scripted repertory of the age accommodated this shift, leveraging the actresses’ personal glamour, charm, womanly figure, and sexual appeal, the innovative and titillating displays of which became a measure of “talent” and helped to establish actresses as box office draws. That it became the fashion for women to speak the prologues and epilogues is often cited as one example of how actresses influenced the drama. This also meant that a female voice, body, and perspective bookended most performances. These brief dramatic pieces were a type of showcase, opportunities for the new ladies of the stage to woo an audience to their cause, since her success both in the play and, more generally, in the profession depended in part on her popularity. To facilitate this flirtation, playwrights catered to performers’ strengths and to the public’s interest in the private lives of the actresses, the latter by incorporating the backstage gossip of the day that centered on the actresses’ sex lives. The prologues and epilogues became “a familiar and direct communication between player and spectator,”38 dialogues that intentionally pointed up the performer’s “real” self, eliding the actress’s professional
persona by blurring, in an overtly sexual manner, the line between the performer’s real life and that of the character’s. Such performances fostered a public intimacy between actresses and spectators, one that thrived on a sexual subtext. It was a dynamic characteristic of the Restoration, part of an ethos that prized and peddled in the staging of female sexuality.

Indeed, in the innovative “offering” of the actress to the theatre-going public, the presence of the female body on the stage served as a coded invitation to offstage intimacy, which left actresses in a vulnerable position. “Without a doubt,” says Sandra Richards, “the actress’s function as ‘entertainer’ was intended to be taken in a double sense.” And sometimes reputations (though not necessarily careers) took a hit as a result. Histories of the period paint an effective picture of the bawdiness of the playhouse as well as how the job of actress came to overlap with that of prostitute, at least in a collective public consciousness, if not in reality. The association was too easily drawn, for the temptation was seemingly too great: as satirist Tom Brown put it, “’tis as hard a matter for a pretty Woman to keep her self honest in a theatre, as ’tis for an Apothecary to keep his Treacle from the Flies in hot Weather; for every Libertine in the Audience will be buzzing about her Honey-Pot.” For his part, Wilson is doubtful that the actresses were in the least bothered by their sexual objectification, or even their whoredom:

One would hardly expect the actresses themselves to complain about having to appear in breeches, or in petticoats “undrest…loosely to the Winds.” Most of them were made of playhouse flesh and blood, and they were encouraged by managers and spectators alike to display themselves provocatively.
He reasons that actresses necessarily came from hardier than usual stock, that they were made of “playhouse flesh and blood,” a phrase that telegraphs a sexual titillation that has come to be synonymous with the Restoration actress.

**Patrons, keepers, and female servitude**

Some actresses were introduced to the theatre by noble patrons who enjoyed their favors. Regarded by the nobility as their property, actresses were frequently met with unmannerly treatment.

-Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress*

Most histories of the Restoration repeat the story of how Elizabeth Barry was made over by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester to become the most celebrated actress of her day. As the story goes, Barry’s initial attempts at acting were a complete failure, and she was rejected by the Duke’s company more than once. While most wrote the aspiring actress off as hopeless, Lord Rochester, libertine, wit, and a self-appointed arbiter of talent, saw potential and took the opportunity to demonstrate his superior judgment in these matters. He wagered that with six month’s training he could transform Barry into a great actress; “He then set about training her, making her rehearse repeatedly on stage and in costume.” In addition to improving her mechanics, Rochester trained her to transform herself into the character and embody the character’s feelings, rather than simply engage in mimicry. As a result of his attentions, Barry reemerged on the stage to great acclaim, triumphing in the part of Isabella, the Hungarian Queen in Rodger Boyle, Earl of Orrery’s tragedy *Mustapha*. At some point during their partnership, Barry became Rochester’s mistress. And in 1677 the actress gave birth to her lover’s child.
Although the anecdote is widely accepted, it is difficult to confirm the veracity of the account. And for Gilli Bush-Bailey “the notion that Barry’s theatrical training was entirely in the hands of Rochester seems at best the result of male boasting and at worst yet another example of the appropriation of women’s work to male control.” She points out that as the adopted daughter of Sir William and Lady Davenant, Barry was brought up in the theatre, and that there were many potential female influences who likely contributed to her theatre education, including the celebrated actress Mary Betterton, who it is known mentored many young actresses, as well as an early and creative partnership with playwright Aphra Behn. Still, this narrative has all of the ingredients that capture the imagination: a damsel in distress, an impossible challenge, a wager, and a Cinderella-like transformation of Barry from less than capable to the belle of the stage. I include it again here because it demonstrates the power of aristocratic patronage, a system designed to reward personal favor with professional opportunity and security; a system that explicitly cast the actress in the role of courtesan. After failing on her own, Barry’s transformation and reemergence in the profession is only possible with Rochester’s intervention, so that the gift of her newfound talent is somehow also linked to her whoredom, uncovered as part of a sexual as well as theatrical awakening under Rochester’s supervision.

Aristocratic patronage of actresses is itself a performance, one that showcased female sexuality and male prowess. Operating as part of a larger network of male hegemonic control, this type of artistic patronage subjected the theatre to aristocratic maneuverings, whims, and tastes. The euphemistic enjoying of an actress’s favors was not just a
personal reward, but, more importantly, a public one, validating masculinity and status, and reinscribing female dependency.

Keeping actresses as mistresses became the vogue among the nobility, emblematic of the libertine culture of the Restoration. The role of kept woman is an inextricable part of the story of the actress, one that pushes into relief the social and economic limitations placed on women in the profession. In other words, where the influence of the actress begins to fail is where the role of the kept woman necessarily begins. Thomas A. King writes:

Whereas early theatre histories rarely mentioned the patrons of male actors, the same narratives repeatedly emphasized that the actresses were sponsored by men invested with the authority and power of the place or position to which they were widely considered to aspire. According to a conventional motif of late 17th-century ephemera, the main reason an actress came to the stage was to find a “keeper.”

Such a motif reflects a prejudice that maintains that “a main function of the stage, as far as women players were concerned, was to give a girl a more effective medium for displaying her personal wares.” Certainly for some women, however, a career on the stage was a means to an end, rather than the prize. Whether by choice or by necessity, the stage was an effective way to attract a keeper who could provide social mobility and financial security, things that could only be achieved through relationships, illegitimate or not, with men. So it is not unreasonable that actresses would use the stage to try to better their situations by advertising not just their availability but willingness to step into the real-life role of the kept woman. The fashion for keeping actresses as mistresses was seemingly modeled by the king himself, who took more than one actress-mistress but most famously elevated the fortunes of Nell Gwyn who, at twenty-one years old, retired
after only seven years on the stage to make a life as Charles’s “Protestant Whore,” as she once famously called herself. William Wycherley’s 1675 comedy *The Country Wife* comments on this popular pastime of actress keeping, through an exasperated and incredulous Old Lady Squeamish: “That men of parts, great acquaintance, and quality, should take up with and spend themselves and fortunes in keeping little playhouse creatures, foh!” Of course, in performance, that the stage was populated with just those female creatures who were the collectables in this courtly game of sexual conquest is the in-joke.

Even putting aside the historical patina of romance, Barry and Gwyn’s success stories are surely more the exception rather than the actress-courtesan rule. “The relationship between aristocratic patrons and the ‘King’s Servants’ in the playhouse,” writes Bush-Bailey, “is complex and peppered with examples of abusive as well as advantageous sexual and social liaisons between actresses and their admirers.” Expectedly, these were fraught arrangements that subjected women to sexual abuse and exploitation. Actresses did, however, routinely profit from sponsors whose considerable social influence and wealth facilitated career-making introductions and kept favorites actively employed in the theatre. Securing a male benefactor was not the only way women made their way to or stayed relevant in the profession, though it was one of the most lucrative and effective, as well as one of the only ways an actress could secure a degree of protection against “unmannerly treatment,” to use Sandra Richards’s turn of phrase.
Moreover, the precarious position of actresses was further exacerbated by their sworn service to the crown. As players, actresses were in a literal sense “His Majesty’s Servants”; however, within the erotic economy of the playhouse women’s servitude takes on a double meaning and brings with it a new set of expectations, ones which play right into a system a patronage that traded on personal favor and professional opportunity. Interestingly, this double sense of female servitude seems to be reflected in the title of John Harold Wilson’s history: “All the King’s Ladies.” Telegraphing male privilege and female subordination, Wilson’s turn of phrase introduces, from the outset, innuendo into his history of the Restoration actresses. Although Wilson does not address this, it seems impossible that there is not a hint of sexual satire at play here, albeit a lighthearted one. It is difficult to extricate the actress from these sexual puns. The fact of the actress’s servitude is a condition that invited an eroticization of the actress, an overlaying the job of actress with that of willing courtesan. To position the actress as prostitute is to also position the playhouse as brothel, an analogy which tips the whole enterprise into the realm of institutionalized prostitution. This correlation is usually only hinted at rather than made explicit in scholarly accounts but is not farfetched, historically:

So tightly bound was the theatre with the life of the court that a proposal in Parliament in 1670 to levy a tax on the playhouses as dens of prostitution drew from Sir John Birkenhead the objection that the players were “the King’s servants, a part of his pleasure.” Sir John Coventry’s snide retort as to whether “the King’s pleasure lie among the men that acted or the women” ended in his being waylaid in the dark on Moll Davies’s street and having his nose cut to the bone for offending the monarch.

The severity of Coventry’s punishment was the court’s way of warning others against impertinence directed against His Majesty. The objection to the proposed tax strongly
indicates that the playhouse functioned as a sexual playground for the aristocracy, an
unofficial, and thus tax-exempt, brothel where the prostitutes also worked as actresses,
sworn servants of the king who served as his pleasure. Playhouse salaries “unofficially”
compensated women for their availability and willingness to engage in off-the-books
performances. Thus, for the actresses, playhouse employment was akin to tacit
acceptance of their whoredom.

The actress/whore trope

. . . it is not difficult to see how anxieties arising from women working in
an openly commercial and wholly public sphere quickly led to parallels
with prostitution, a link that has endured for generations in a patriarchal
society employing the binaries of private/public, virgin/whore as its
constructs of femininity.

-Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Treading the Bawds: Actresses and
Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage*

A patriarchal discourse that correlates the professional theatre woman performer
with the professional woman sex worker derives its power from its ability to diagnosis
female virtue, an assessment of femaleness that either glorifies or condemns. Indeed,
such rhetoric attempts to limit female influence by proscribing the ways in which women
can legitimately participate in the public sphere. Bush-Bailey writes: “Accusations of
immorality and ‘bawdy’ can be seen as attempts to suppress a female discourse worked
out in the very public sphere of the playhouse; a female discourse that, at times, openly
challenged male hierarchies in theatre companies and, in a broader context, questioned
constructions of femininity.”

But even so, this is not to discount the very real
commercial possibilities of the actress/whore, for the suggestion of sexual availability
staged to entertain and titillate lends credence to the age-old maxim “sex sells,” as well as leaves open the possibility of female sexual and financial empowerment. In both scenarios, female sexuality, leveraged either as ammunition against women and their profession, or exploited by one or both for its commercial possibilities, is the calling card of the actress-as-whore metaphor.

In her 2005 study *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*, Kristen Pullen demonstrates a space for female agency within the whore discourse, arguing that rather than being limited by their sexual notoriety, certain performing women used it to their advantage to further their careers, secure their financial and social independence, and challenge existing paradigms of female sexuality. She also reintroduces into contemporary scholarship on actresses an overlooked usage for the word “whore.” Rather than an exact synonym for prostitute, the primary definition of “whore” in the Restoration was an unruly woman, an insult that in today’s parlance would translate to “bitch.” Here Pullen relies on Samuel Johnson’s dictionary definition of, “A woman who converses unlawfully with men; a fornicator; an adulteress; a strumpet.”53 The sense of “whore” as one who exchanges sexual services for money or gifts was a secondary meaning. So, according to Pullen, “whore” in Restoration England “seems to have designated a sexually free woman even more than a prostitute.”54 She explains how the problem of vernacular obfuscates this particular historical narrative:

Transferring the language but not the meaning of seventeenth-century vernacular is one way historians elide the position of the Restoration actress. . . . Accepting the commonplace notion that all seventeenth-century actresses were whores extirpates the possibility that they exercised some measure of control over their lives and representations. . . . [and]
prevents historians from narrativizing the first generation as autonomous subjects.55

By studying those women who have performed as actresses and prostitutes, Pullen’s demonstrates that it is possible to recover “alternative narratives of female sexuality and experience” that “may allow women a space for agency.”56 One of Pullen’s case studies is dedicated to Elizabeth (Betty) Boutell, a Restoration actress known primarily for her breeches roles onstage and her sexual availability offstage. Through Boutell, Pullen interrogates dominant ideologies of the period that conflate the identities of private woman with the actress’s performance of character, suggesting that “rather than being stigmatized by her sexual notoriety, she used it to further her theatrical career.”57 Without discounting Pullen’s revisionist reading of female agency within the actress/whore discourse, Bush-Bailey finds fault with Pullen’s reformulation of the label “whore”:

The difficulty with this approach is that the “meaning” of the unruly, transgressive woman is inextricably bound up with her sexual and sexualized identity. The enduring power of this essentially patriarchal construct has been the subject of feminist criticism for some thirty years or more. Its prevalence in historical discourse is demonstrated by the wealth of materials that Pullen can draw upon in her series of case-studies to the twentieth century. . . . the unavoidable issue here is that the hegemonic accumulation of sexualized meaning and meanings in the history of the actress has in fact prevailed. Those meanings have worked and still work to reinforce one another in multilayered histories that resist erasure and will simply ignore alternative strategies . . . . 58

Indeed, the question of the actress cannot be entertained apart from these sexualized meanings, which are endlessly bound up with and understood in the context of prostitution. So that, as Sophie Tomlinson has written, the “perception of the actress as a whore is essentially a perception of woman as wrong-doer, as (sexual) malefactor. It is a short step from this notion to the combined threat of female agency and feminine
counterfeit or duplicity.'” Further, scholars like Kristina Straub emphasize how “the neat fit between actress and prostitution naturalized women as commodities of sexual fantasy.” This accumulation of sexualized meanings and identities necessarily underpins stagings of the actress. But at the same time, staging the actress claims a public space for women’s issues and selves, fostering a feminist discourse that necessarily questions constructions of femininity; thus, such stagings are in themselves acts of resistance, ideological challenges to the enduring patriarchal control of the theatre of “male genius” and its representations of women.

**Staging the actress**

We had come to realize how essential to success some freedom of judgment and action are to the actor. . . . we had further seen how freedom in the practice of our art, how the bare opportunity to practice it at all, depended, for the actress, on considerations humiliatingly different from those that confronted the actor. The stage career of an actress was inextricably involved in the fact that she was a woman and that those who were the masters of the Theatre were men.

-Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship*

The above brief discussion of antifeminism and the advent of the actress on the English-speaking stage serves as the historical foundation for this study’s critique of the actress character, dramatic representations that stage their own cultural narrative that is at once the product of this historical legacy of the professional actress and repeated attempts to reform and reshape it. The actress has long been a popular literary character, but she has received far more critical attention as the creative product of novelists than of playwrights, which seems to reflect a privileging of the written word over the gesture of
performance. In fact, the “actress-novel” has become an accepted and recognized sub-genre of the Victorian novel, while no such sub-genre exists for plays. Part of the design of the study is to build an archive of “actress-plays,” plays which prominently feature an actress character, and to demonstrate how the actress character might function as a critical lens, one that speaks from the margins and necessarily performs and makes visible female experience, while charting and questioning its own history of representation.

Among these actress-plays, Christopher St. John’s The First Actress will serve as a touchstone for this study. Under the direction of Edith Craig, The First Actress premiered on 8 May 1911, the third in a triple bill of one-act plays produced by Pioneer Players for their inaugural season. St. John’s play takes on the history of sexism against the actress to argue for women’s suffrage. By foregrounding the inaugural moment for women in theatre history and enacting the legacy of the first actress, the play’s performance strategically functions as testimony to female autonomy and an endorsement of another inevitable historical “first”: the enfranchisement of women. Set backstage at the New Theatre, Drury Lane in 1661, The First Actress depicts the aftermath of the titular first actress Margaret Hughes’s performance of Desdemona in a production of Othello. It begins at the curtain call of Othello, with sounds of front-of-the-house applause “mingled with catcalls, hissing, and hooting” and Hughes’s quick retreat backstage to escape an outraged “pippin-throwing” cabal: “Call yourself a woman! You ought to be ashamed of yourself” (697). Backstage, Griffin, a fellow actor with Killigrew’s company, sympathizes with the distressed actress while also maintaining that
women are just not suited for the profession. When Hughes bursts into tears at the thought of her failed stage debut, Griffin offers cold comfort: “You have not failed. It is your sex which has failed. It has been weighed in the balance and found wanting” (700). According to Griffin, Hughes’s performance was doomed from the outset, because acting “is the art of assuming a character, not the accident of being it” (701). Functioning as the mouthpiece for antitheatrical prejudice against women, Griffin goes on to reason that women lack the “mental power” and “creative imagination” to make careful study of a dramatic character. Using fuzzy logic, he issues a blanket dismissal of female ability when he rhetorically asks “What artistic creation have women to their credit in history?” (701).

The first half of the play pits the lone actress Hughes against a chorus of men. In addition to Griffin, Hughes is joined backstage by her lover Sir Charles Sedley and his crony Lord Hatton, and Hughes’s experience quickly becomes secondary to that of her male companions. When Sedley declares the evening a great success, Lord Hatton concurs, but does so by commenting on the “[v]ery glorious scenes and perspectives” (697), humorously ignoring Hughes’s pioneering effort altogether. Instead, the evening’s triumph belongs not to Hughes but to her lover, Sedley, who has manufactured this theatrical occasion to spite the most popular boy actress of the day, Edward Kynaston. His attempt to create a new fashion for women actresses is part of his plot to render Kynaston and his ilk obsolete, so that the actress exists as a pawn in this feud, moved onto the stage by one male player to displace another. It is a maneuver that clinches Sedley’s victory; he has not only “settled” his vendetta against Kynaston by
demonstrating the viability of women actresses in female parts, he has bested “my Lord Rochester, who swore I could not train you for the stage in thirty lessons!” (699). Such boasting underscores the appropriation of women’s work to male control and the subsumption of female interests within a creative economy of theatrical endeavor. Katherine E. Kelly elucidates Hughes’s disempowerment by locating the actress within “a triangulation of desire,” wherein “Hughes finds herself positioned between the boy actress, Kynaston, and her lover, Sir Charles Sedley, who is, however, so absorbed with defeating Kynaston that their rivalry outweighs the affection between master and mistress.” And Lesley Ferris’s analysis of the play reads Sedley’s seizure of Kynaston’s female roles as a metaphorical cuckolding, a validation of masculinity facilitated through Hughes’s physical displacement of her stage counterpart. Both interpretations illuminate masculinist homosocial agendas, ones that fuel personal grudges and competitive wagers, and exert hegemonic control over women’s participation within the public sphere of the theatre.

When the men exit, Hughes is finally permitted a moment of quiet self-reflection. Exhausted and defeated from the evening’s ordeal, she is anguished by the possible consequences of what she views as her failed professional debut. Her last words before she falls asleep are a heartfelt apology that acknowledges the responsibility that goes along with her position as a woman pioneer in a man’s profession: “Griffin was right. I ought never to have attempted it—I have made it impossible for others—perhaps there never will be—any others—I am sorry for that—very sorry—” (702). As she sleeps, Hughes’s nightmare experience is swept away by a visitation of ghosts of theatre future: a
pageant of ten historical actresses from the British theatre move across the stage. Each actress addresses the sleeping Hughes, sharing stories of future successes that counter this moment of Hughes’s self-defeat. These well-known theatre women include Nell Gwyn, Peg Woffington, Sarah Siddons, and Madame Vestris. The appearance of these future actresses—both as historical characters within the dramatic world of the play and as performed by real women actresses in the present moment—renders void Hughes’s panic that she “may have kept my sex off the stage for centuries—if not forever” (702).

Providing a type of closure to the dreamscape conjured by the sleeping first actress is the final actress to appear to Hughes, designated “An Actress of To-day,” an actress role designed to function as another link in the play’s feminist forward-looking past-as-future spectacle as well as an anchor to the present theatrical moment. In the original 1911 production, Lena Ashwell, a well-known actress and theatre manager, performed this role that stages Ashwell as “herself”—an actress of the day—rather than a character in the traditional sense. The self-conscious metatheatricality of the play’s final moment highlights the actress doubling throughout—real women actresses from today perform actresses from the historical past. Such a dramaturgical strategy enacts an intersection of woman and character, and the real and theatrical, creating an alternative locus of meaning that holds up to scrutiny the very idea of the actress herself. In *The First Actress*, St. John innovatively links the current fight for women’s suffrage with the historical struggle of actresses for professional acceptance by staging the wisdom of hindsight, as embodied by each actress who takes the stage. The play ends on a triumphant note that calls attention to the split between history and memory. Coming forth as Actress of To-day, Ashwell
declares: “When I am born, dear Peg, people will have quite forgotten that the stage was ever barred to us. They will laugh at the idea that acting was once considered a man’s affair—they will be incredulous that the pioneer actress was bitterly resented” (706). Her speech and play end with the crowning of “brave” Hughes, as the actresses gather to collectively pay tribute to their “forgotten pioneer.”

In *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003), Jacky Bratton proposes an “intertheatrical” reading of the performance event as an antidote to theatre history’s “grand narrative,” an enduring paradigm that defines the field within a narrow “system of difference” that privileges the literary (of male genius). She argues that this is a product of early-nineteenth century reformations designed to stave off political instability, at which point “theatre history became a part of the hegemonic negotiation taking place at many levels in British culture.”67 De-emphasizing the tidy script/drama division, an intertheatrical reading strives for a comprehensive “awareness of the elements and interactions that make up the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players, a sense of the knowledge, or better the knowingness, about playing that spans a lifetime or more, and that is activated for all participants during the performance event.”68 As an approach to theatre history, intertheatricality posits that all entertainments, including the dramas, that are performed within a single theatrical tradition are more or less interdependent. They are uttered in a language, shared by successive generations, which includes not only speech and the systems of the stage—scenery, costume, lighting and so forth—but also genres, conventions and, very importantly, memory. The fabric of that memory, shared by audience and players, is made up of dances, spectacles, plays and songs, experienced as particular performances—a different selection, of course, for each individual—woven upon knowledge of the performers’ other current and previous roles, and their personae on and off the stage.69
Among Bratton’s new readings that focus on how performers and performances transmit history and memory, one of the most interesting—and according to Bratton, potentially subversive—is the study of actor genealogies. As a method in theatre history, Bratton approaches genealogy in its literal sense, as kinship and the history of families, an otherwise “unfashionable” approach whose validity and importance to theatre historiography is generally met by strong academic resistance. But, as Bratton argues, such a “history from below” is perhaps especially significant to an understanding of theatre professionals. “It is moreover,” she contends, “an approach that offers some purchase on the otherwise hidden histories of women in nineteenth-century theatre.” By examining the extensive and diverse theatrical lineage of Sarah Siddons, for example, Bratton argues that “the significance of women as the carriers of the line, managers of theatre and, perhaps, possessors and transmitters of theatrical talent—as prime custodians of cultural capital—can be brought into focus in quite a new way.” Accordingly, Bratton champions the study of theatre family genealogies for its potential to illuminate important people and patterns overlooked by more conventional approaches to the historical narrative. “This is about the dynamics between the people in the profession,” writes Bratton, “and particularly about a way to approach the special position of women in the nineteenth-century theatre.”

Inspired by Bratton’s example, I propose a theatrical genealogy of the actress—theatrical in the dual sense of the word, that this is a genealogy of the theatre as well as a genealogy inscribed by theatrical performance. This family history is revealed and perpetuated through the interdependency of theatrical stagings of the actress character
and the successive generations of real-life actresses who portray them. While this formulation deviates from the literal definition of genetic kinship that Bratton relies on, the actress doubling that performs the historical actress pageant in St. John’s play *The First Actress* dramatizes how we might conceive of the familial ties that bind this extended family of professional theatre women, ties that on the English-speaking stage reach back from a perpetual present moment, through each actress who has mounted or will mount the stage, to a common ancestor, the First Actress.

Current theories of women’s autobiographical practice shed light on the significance of St. John’s depiction of female and familial group identity that is central to a claim of a theatrical genealogy of the actress. In “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” Susan Stanford Friedman argues that “individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities.” In this essay, Friedman calls attention to the work of feminist scholars Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow, who theorize the ideological and psychological importance of relational identities to the development of female selfhood. For Chodorow, Friedman explains, the “concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to women.” As opposed to the masculine personality, the “basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world,” a relational model established through identification and attachment in the mother-daughter relationship. This primary female relationship, which “remains central to the ongoing process of female individuation,” provides a model for the importance of identification with theatre and theatrical foremothers—real and staged—as formative for each new generation of actresses—again,
both real and staged—part of the feminist ideological and psychological framework supporting St. John’s dramatization of a transhistorical actress genealogy.

Also underpinning St. John’s suffrage drama is the importance of a self-constituted group identity forged in defiance of social and legal prohibitions. Illuminating the significance of St. John’s depiction of an independently constructed sense of female selfhood is Rowbotham’s notion of “woman’s consciousness” of self. As Friedman explains, it is impossible for a woman to “experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture”; consequently “women develop a dual consciousness—the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription.” Of course the actress is always already doubly defined by the dominant male culture as woman and actress, a complex pairing of personal and professional female identities that has historically presented a social tautology. In St. John’s actress pageant, a “woman’s consciousness” of self is at the heart of the personal in the political fight to redefine womanhood to include the right to vote. And, significantly, St. John chooses to employ the actress, the professional player of female selves, as symbolic of the struggle to realize a new, woman-constructed female identity in a male-dominated society, intentionally leveraging not only the troubled history that long prevented the actress from creating female characters on the stage, but also the theatrical spectacle of real actresses bringing to life their historical foremothers who paved their way. St. John’s The First Actress self-reflexively critiques the cultural
prescriptions that define women by staging actresses taking the power of representation into their own hands.

Finally, that the actress is “a necessarily metatheatrical performer” further complicates an easy reading of the actress onstage as well as promotes a new understanding of the actress as perpetually and knowingly reflexive. During performance the actress is not herself (she is the character) and at the same time—to borrow language from performance studies—she is “not not” herself; in other words, we are always aware that we are watching an actress acting a part. For the purposes of this study, then, even when the actress is the actress character, she is also always the actress acting. The intersection of these two mirrored yet independently constructed actress identities (character and woman) in a single performance invites multiple “readings,” including an understanding of the embodied performance of the actress character as loosely autobiographical, a type of performance of self. The study’s title, “Staging the Actress,” is meant to capture this knowingly reflexive, metatheatrical doubling and layering of real and theatrical identities in the casting of an actress in the part of an actress. It is an approach encouraged and supported by Bratton’s intertheatrical readings that consider how performers’ current and previous on- and offstage personas, which are necessarily embodied and represented in each performance, become part of the fabric of memory shared by audience and players alike. Alisa Solomon says “self-conscious theatre self-deconstructs”; in other words,

[a]s the quintessential mimetic art—Bruce Wilshire calls it “the art of imitation that reveals imitation”—theater can question the very means of its production, call attention to its own processes and limits, and, as a result, raise questions about the images and ideologies it may give stage
and voice to. It can self-reflexively consider its own embeddedness in cultural institutions and historical moments. When it does so, theater—in Stuart Hall’s terms—“negotiates” dominate culture, at once reproducing and resisting it. 79

In a similar vein, this dissertation contends that staging the actress is a dramaturgical strategy that necessarily calls attention to the means and production of representations of women, and that the actress character self-reflexively critiques its own “embeddedness,” even as it reproduces and resists cultural definition and male control.

**Chapter breakdown**

This study of the actress character is based on a broad survey of plays from Western drama. The actress character under consideration is a woman who identifies herself as a dramatic actress and is pursuing, engaged in, or has retired from a professional career in the theatre or the film/TV industry, though the former is my primary focus. It should be noted that I have not included musicals or women performers who are primarily singers in this mix. Also, only printed play scripts available in English translation were considered, one of several prerequisites that determined which plays are included in the bibliography, as well as in the selected annotated bibliography of actress-plays that make up Appendix A. 80 While this bibliography is necessarily a work-in-progress, its 100 plus titles represent plays from the canonical (Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, 1895) to the overlooked (Virginia Woolf’s *Freshwater*, 1923), from the popular (Kaufman and Ferber’s *The Royal Family*, 1927) to the biographical (Pam Gems’s *Mrs. Pat*, 2006). The list spans 350 years, touches every theatrical genre, and includes celebrated playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Tom Stoppard, and Maria Irene Fornes.
My premise of a theatrical actress genealogy with its roots on the Restoration stage limits for the time being the current scope of my analysis to the English-speaking stage. This, unfortunately, precludes a detailed treatment of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, arguably the only canonical work to feature the actress character—two actress characters, in fact. Yet, even though Russian actresses emerged from a different theatrical tradition than their sisters in the West, one that resisted “Western aesthetics and sex/gender ideology,” there are many dramatic tropes that can be traced across this geographic and cultural divide that seem to share a similar equivocation concerning the professional actress. And although *The Seagull* is not this study’s primary focus, this necessary omission speaks to the richness of this line of inquiry, setting up future studies that will examine how staging the actress illuminates the special position of women in Russian and other non-Western theatre traditions.

My approach to this study is to weave together threads of historiography, cultural studies, and literary analysis finding where they converge on and around the actress character, reflecting and shaping dramatic representations of the actress in the process. Generally, scholarship on the actress undertakes a biographical approach to historical figures. Here a consideration of the actress’s career and the parts she has played is a means to glean a fuller picture of professional concerns and personal considerations. And while this is an important and valuable approach, in this dissertation I depart from this well-established model by directly addressing the figure that is constructed on the page for the stage rather than the woman performer herself. Consequently, I do not spend time focused on the particular actresses who played these actress parts. Rather than specific
points of biographical comparison, I am more interested in the general implications of casting and the performance of actresses as actresses. By undertaking this line of inquiry, I undercover a particular type of female character that stages critical interventions into culturally entrenched narratives of femininity. I acknowledge that my focus on the English-speaking theatre necessarily limits the scope of the conversation and the representation of this character as a particular kind of white, heterosexual, Christian woman in a profession dominated by men of the same stripe. Yet, this is only a starting place, and I believe it is useful to recognize this historical bias in mainstream theatre. In terms of this character on the English-speaking stage, ethnic and sexual diversity is a mid- to late-twentieth century development, no surprise considering both the commercial nature of the industry and the publishing market. The gradual and still evolving diversification of actress representations to reflect an increasingly diverse industry and society deserves much more attention than the scope of this study currently allows.

The following chapters are organized thematically but also chronologically according to a theatrical genealogy of the actress. Chapter 2: Staging History and Professionalism, then, picks up where this introduction leaves off, with an examination of representations of the earliest English actresses, the foremothers of the profession. This chapter surveys depictions of actress origin stories and “forgotten” actress pioneers, as well as how the struggle for women to define themselves as artists and professionals in a new field is hindered by cultural prescriptions of femininity. Anchoring this chapter is an in-depth analysis of April De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* (1993), a feminist revisioning of the Restoration stage by a contemporary British woman playwright that
critiques notions of female autonomy and depicts the actress as both liberated and limited by her new employment. I devote a lot of time to De Angelis’s play, in part, because the complexity of her dramaturgy demands it. She presents us with, essentially, five actress characters; and, like St. John’s The First Actress, the play must be read on multiple levels—it is both a work of historical reclamation as well as an intervention into the current and future status of women. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the actress functions as a critical approach to history, and specifically how De Angelis’s play creates a usable past, which I take from Gerda Lerner’s concept of history-making. This chapter also examines the pervasiveness of the actress/whore trope in theatrical narratives, both dramatic and critical, and the power of the actress character to resist and interrogate patriarchal discourses that limit women’s participation and contributions to public life.

Chapter 3: Staging Contemporary Attitudes and Respectability turns to depictions of the actress in nineteenth century drama, considering how the Victorian preoccupation with respectability influenced actress stagings. By virtue of her profession the actress refused the emblematic role of “The Angel in the House” that signaled female duty, compliance, and gentility. But, as I argue, the actress character functioned as a public defense of this seemingly noncompliant woman. Actress-plays of this era even go so far as to stage a parallel metaphor “The Angel of the Theatre” designed to mitigate the perceived threat the independent actress posed to social conformity. Here my detailed analysis of John Palgrave Simpson’s World and Stage (1859) illuminates the hegemony of respectability that reinscribes the actress’s infamy; but ultimately this melodrama holds up the actress as a paragon of virtue, though even this clear moral victory
celebrating the actress is not enough to overcome the distance between the separate spheres of world and stage. In this chapter I argue that such dramatizations of the actress are a product of a patriarchal compulsion for objective truth, so that male playwrights tend to approach the actress character with the air of scientific inquiry, dramatizing a need to pin down and expose the true nature of the acting woman.

In Chapter 4: Staging New World Values and Ambition, I turn my focus to the American stage in the twentieth century and its characterizations of a “modern” actress, a talented woman who is focused on career, sexually independent, glamorous, and who possesses that certain captivating “something,” all traits which eventually become nearly synonymous with the term “actress.” At the turn of the twentieth century the emergence of the New Woman and her repudiation of Victorian ideologies along with the fight for women’s suffrage troubled notions of gender, forcing a reconsideration of traditional values and entrenched constructions of femininity that played out on public stages as well as streets. This chapter features an analysis of Sophie Treadwell’s *O Nightingale* (1925), an overlooked play by one of American theatre’s premier women playwrights, which, to borrow Elizabeth Robin’s characterization, critiques the confusing and often humiliating conditions that confront the aspiring actress, conditions that serve as a reminder that the actress is a woman and that those who are the “masters” of the theatre are men. Treadwell’s critique of the theatrical conditions that obstruct women’s advancement and squelch creativity resonates with the approaches undertaken by both St. John and De Angelis to promote a feminist consciousness. Concerned with the politics of self-determination, these plays engage with understanding the multiple and different roles of
women, posing perhaps a more practical than existential question designed to challenge our approach to women in the world rather than rationalize a feminine presence. In the concluding chapter I briefly consider the current moment, and bring into the conversation two very recent actress-plays, David Ives’s *Venus in Fur* (2010) and Lynn Nottage’s *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), entertaining the question of why contemporary playwrights continue to stage the actress character. Ives imagines a talented actress with exceptional powers of transformation, who might not be the woman she claims to be—who might not even be human at all—while for Nottage the actress character calls attention to the erasure of women of color. Each chapter articulates a turning point in women’s history and in the construction of the actress as a dramatic character, illuminating a self-reflexive strategic and theatrical intervention into conventional notions of femininity and uncovering a new narrative about gender and performance. As a critical intervention, the actress character represents a site of becoming and possibility, and claims a public space for women’s voices, bodies, and selves.
Endnotes


2 For a full account of the actresses who have claim to the title of First Actress see Chapter 1 “The Arrival of the Actress” in Elizabeth Howe’s *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) especially p.24. Importantly, Howe emphasizes that while there was no support for actresses in the public theatre in the early seventeenth century, the idea of a female actor had “gained considerable currency” (21) due to the participation of aristocratic women in private theatricals at court. These performing women included Queen Anne and after her Queen Henrietta Maria. Also, Rosamond Gilder’s *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931) details the histories of the earliest women in the Italian and French theatre as well as on the English stage. She also echoes the sentiment of this dissertation that “the actress of to-day still owes a gesture of gratitude to the Isabellas, the Madeleines and Armandes who led the way” (xviii).


4 Qtd. in Wilson 5.

5 Qtd. in Wilson 6.


7 The first serious study of the first English actresses might be a work copyrighted in 1910, Henry Wysham Lanier’s *The First English Actresses from the Initial Appearance of Women on the Stage in 1660 till 1700* (New York: The Players, 1930). In the prefatory note Lanier writes, “Since I cannot find that any writer hitherto has made a book on this pleasant subject of the first actresses in English—the references to the advent of women on our stage being confined to a few chance pages and notes in miscellanies of the period and modern studies of drama—it seems appropriate that The Players’ Series, of monographs on theatrical personalities, should start with some attempt to focus the information available” (5). The next important work, published a quarter century before Wilson, is Rosamond Gilder’s *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931).

8 Wilson 1.

9 Wilson 3.

10 In her book *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) Kristen Pullen argues that despite her status as sexual victim, “the prostitute can speak for and from the margins” (1), and here I follow her extremely useful model for uncovering feminisms that exist and thrive in our periphery.

12 Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 21. Regarding the absence of actresses, Michael Shapiro speculates that “Perhaps the strongest reason for the continued exclusion of women form the stage was a desire on the part of male actors to preserve the profession of acting as a site for male employment. The apprenticeship system itself need not have prevented English troupes form bringing young women into their ranks, for some crafts did take female apprentices” (185). See Shapiro’s “The Introduction of Actresses in England: Delay or Defensiveness?” found in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, eds. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999) 177-200.


16 Ferris 68.


18 Barish 50.

19 Qtd. in Barish 50.

20 Ferris 40.

21 Ferris 40.

22 Qtd. in Ferris 65.


24 Tomlinson 189.

25 Tomlinson 189-190.

26 In a more recent article “A Jacobean Dramatic Usage of ‘Actress,’” Sophie Tomlinson points out that the comedy *The Family of Love* (pub. 1608), attributed to Thomas Middleton, employs the word “actress” in the dramatic sense of the word, and not in the general sense of
“female doer.” And this example from early modern drama is what is currently cited by the OED as the first usage of “actress” in the sense of a “dramatic performer.” See “A Jacobean Dramatic Usage of ‘Actress’” in Notes and Queries 55:3 (2008) 282-83.


28 For example, in “The Introduction of Actresses in England: Delay or Defensiveness?” Michael Shapiro writes, “Even after actresses were permitted on the Spanish stage in 1587, they were outlawed between 1596 and 1600 and carefully regulated thereafter: they had to be married women, accompanied by their husbands, not visited more than twice backstage by male spectators, and they were forbidden to wear costumes considered too revealing” (180). Also, when comparing the delayed appearance of actresses on the English stage to their comparatively early inclusion on Continental stages, Dympna Callaghan points out that, “In those countries where female players were allowed on stage, women were no less oppressed than in England”; and further cautions against the conclusion “that women’s appearance on the stage at the Restoration should be read simply as “progress” (31).

29 Qtd. in Richards 1.


32 Maus 595.


34 Qtd. in Howe 25-26. According to Sandra Richards, “Killigrew made the mistake of displaying his actresses before they were fully trained so that the men at first outshone them. Davenant was wise enough to keep males in women’s parts until actresses began to draw the largest audiences” (2).

35 Henry Wysham Lanier, The First English Actresses from the Initial Appearance of Women on the Stage in 1660 till 1700 (New York: The Players, 1930) 41. On 18 August 1660, Samuel Pepys wrote that he had seen Edward Kynaston act the part of the Duke’s sister in The Loyal Subject at the Cockpit, and that the boy “made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life” (The Diary of Samuel Pepys, eds. Robert Latham and William Matthews, vol. 1, 224). The following year, on 7 January 1661, just days after Pepys’s first experience of women on the stage, he again commented on Kynaston’s performance, this time in Ben Jonson’s Epicoene; Or, The Silent Woman where the actor was required to appear in “three shapes: I, as a poor woman in ordinary clothes to please Morose; then in fine clothes as a gallant, and in them was clearly the prettiest woman in the whole house—and lastly, as a man; and then likewise did appear the
handsomest man in the house” (Diary vol. 2, 7). Kynaston was an early member of Killigrew’s King’s company. “He was sworn in on 6 October 1660, and for the first season he continued to play these female roles, mixing them with young male parts” (J. Milling “Kynaston, Edward, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online edition Sept. 2013).

36 Richards 7.

37 Howe 17-18. Italics in original.

38 Howe 93. Katharine Eisaman Maus is one of many scholars who echo the sentiment that the Restoration actresses were praised not only for their ability to convincingly act a range of characters, “but for their ability to inform their dramatic portrayals with the force of their personal talent and idiosyncratic vision” (598). She also notes that “[p]rologues and epilogues, with their ambiguous positions between the fictional and the real, provided ideal opportunities to exploit the relationship between the player and the part” (599).

39 Richards 3.

40 Qtd. in Gilli Bush-Bailey, Treading the Bawds: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006)188. Most histories of the Restoration reference this quip, written and published by Thomas Brown in Letters from the Living to the Dead, part of a fictional letter from the deceased female playwright Aphra Behn to Anne Bracegirdle, “the famous Virgin Actress.”

41 Wilson 85.

42 Richards 5.

43 Bush-Bailey 45.

44 Bush-Bailey 46.

45 Thomas A. King, “‘As If (She) Were Made on Purpose to Put the Whole World into Good Humour’: Reconstructing the First English Actresses,” TDR 36.3 (1992): 93.

46 Lanier 21. Wilson also echoes this sentiment: “When we remember also that many actresses were trivial-minded women, interested in acting not as a career but only as a means of displaying their wares to prospective buyers, we can only conclude that their chief effect on dramatic literature was to push it steadily in the direction of sex and sensuality” (107).

47 This oft repeated story about Nell Gwyn has her calming an angry mob of Whig sympathizers who had surrounded her coach—they had mistaken her for Louise de Kérouaille, Charles’s French and Catholic mistress—by sticking her head out the window and good-naturedly crying out, “Pray, good people, be civil, I am the Protestant whore!” “Immediately,” writes Charles Beauclerk, “the curses turned to cheers, caps were tossed in the air, and a path cleared for
her coach. Waving and smiling, she passed on” (307). See Beauclerk’s *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King* (New York: Grove P, 2005).


49 Bush-Bailey 46.

50 Richards 10. Richards gathers these facts from Bishop Gilbert Burnet’s *A History of My Own Time*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1823) 468. Sir John Coventry was attacked on Suffolk Street, the same street where King Charles II had purchased a house for his mistress, actress Moll Davis, an exceptionally talented singer and dancer.


52 Bush-Bailey 36.


54 Pullen 23.

55 Pullen 23.

56 Pullen 2.

57 Pullen 8.

58 Bush-Bailey 4-5.


66 The ten historical actresses to appear to Hughes from the future are Nell Gwyn (1650-1687), Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713), Anne Bracegirdle (1673/4-1730), Anne Oldfield (1683-1730), Peg Woffington (1714-1760), Kitty Clive (1711-1785), Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), Fanny Abington (1737-1815), Dorothy Jordan (1761-1816), and Madame Vestris (1797-1856).

67 Bratton 10.

68 Bratton 37.

69 Bratton 37-38.

70 Jacky Bratton’s case studies utilize anecdote, mimicry, popular entertainment, and genealogical research to “make approaches to theatre history that challenge and deconstruct (rather than simply overturn) this binary Modernist history” (16). The binary Bratton refers to—between the popular and the art of theatre, embodied as female and male respectively—is referenced in the epigraph that begins this chapter.

71 Bratton 91.

72 Bratton 174.

73 Bratton 174.


75 Friedman 77.

76 Friedman 75.

77 Here I borrow and expand upon Katherine Newey’s characterization of the actress as necessarily metatheatrical as put forth in “Melodrama and Metatheatre: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century Theatre,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring 1997). She writes, the actress “is metatheatrical in the way that she is constructed by the theatrical profession and the viewing strategies and customs of her audience, as her presence on stage is seen implicitly to refer to an extra-theatrical existence which is compromised or corrupted by her on-stage life” (92).

Solomon 3.

Please see Appendix A for a fuller description of the parameters that determined play selection.

CHAPTER 2

STAGING HISTORY AND PROFESSIONALISM

But history is more than collective memory; it is memory formed and shaped so as to have meaning. This process, by which people preserve and interpret the past, and then reinterpret it in light of new questions, is “history-making.” It is not a dispensable intellectual luxury; history-making is a social necessity.

-Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*

In her history of the earliest actresses Rosamond Gilder uses a religious metaphor to illustrate an underlying mistrust of and the equivocal position of the theatre: “Ever since Eve invented costume, and, coached by the Serpent, enacted that little comedy by which she persuaded Adam that the bitter apple of knowledge was sweet and comforting, there has been something satanic in the very nature of the theatre. Born of ritual and of revelry, it is at once child of God and offspring of the Devil.” Conversely, by framing the Genesis creation narrative in theatrical terms, Gilder’s analogy quite purposefully casts Eve as an—or, the first—actress, and calls attention to the central role of female performance in the fall of man. In the role of the serpent’s instrument, the precipitator of original sin, and a natural deceiver, the easy correlation between Eve, the first woman, and acting has had implications for how history has characterized the arrival of professional actresses.
Early appraisals of the actress are inextricably tied to the fact that she was a woman. Sandra Richards’s assessment captures the singular manner in which the introduction of women unsettled—or corrupted—the profession: “Given the prevailing attitudes to women on stage, the first appearance of the actress had the general effect of lowering the moral tone of the theatres and plays.” Here Richards not only speaks to the tension between the perceived feminine ideal and the noncompliance of professional theatre women who willfully transgressed seventeenth-century gender expectations, but also to the notion of the actress as a moral contagion who brought low a heretofore stable and pure system.

In *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (1992), Kristina Straub argues that public discourses of femininity and masculinity in the eighteenth century were shaped by writings and other popular representations of actors’ and actresses’ sexuality, part of a steady stream of verbal and visual sexual rhetoric that had played on the public’s imagination since the Restoration, informing not only contemporary attitudes but historiography about women and theatre. Her insightful analysis of *The Playhouse-Pocket Companion* (1779), an eighteenth-century text that “writes actresses into the role of ‘Eve,’ the spoiler of a paradisiacal theatrical world before the entrance of women on the stage,” contextualizes how, historically, the “professionalization of women in the theater is, in fact, associated with the moral breakdown of the theatrical world in general.” For theatre women, this paradox of professionalization is consistent with a mistrust and devaluation of femininity, which
accompanied the actress into the public realm. For the theatre profession, gender parity results in irreparable loss and ruination. Straub writes:

The theatre of Shakespeare, an Edenic construction in many theatrical texts of the eighteenth century, comes before the Fall specifically because of its exclusion of actresses: ‘no women being admitted into their companies, they were clear from the scandal, which has since fallen upon the stage from the frailty of the female part of the performers.’ . . . The Edenic metaphor is explicit: ‘in the days of innocence Eve seduced, became herself a seducer—-the women-players become abandoned, their fellow-performers of the other sex could not possibly preserve the purity of their morals.’

By leveraging a religious metaphor, antitheatricalists of the eighteenth century expressed confidence that

[t]he introduction of female players was “the cause of all that obscenity and immorality with which the stage was afterwards, not without great reason, charged; and, moreover, of the looseness of morals, and irregularity of life, of which the players have never since been altogether clear.”

The relational model of separate and opposite spheres, which was becoming the dominate paradigm for understanding sexuality, “increasingly represented women’s sexuality as controlled (and contained) by male dominance,” while “representations of actresses stress a very ‘unfeminine’ control over their sexuality.” These representations of actresses’ sexuality as undisciplined (read “unnatural”) exist as the product of this ideological incompatibility between femininity constructed as passive and private—in other words, femininity that is fixed as the antithesis of masculinity—and an “actress” femininity, which is inescapably constituted in the public realm, and presents itself as autonomous and dynamic—in other words, uncontrollable and dangerous. By virtue of their profession, actresses subverted the dominant sexual paradigm. And by this

52
estimation, actresses were monstrous women, public dissenters against the domestication of femininity. While their status as professionals sexually stigmatized actresses on the one hand, the discourse of professionalism that was fashioned around the actress attempted, in part, to discipline and render tolerably acceptable her particular and unfamiliar brand of sexuality without sabotaging the gender paradigm of separate and opposite spheres.

Like Eve, then, the actress’s arrival marks an irretrievable loss of innocence; and also like Eve, the actress is marked as a seductress, her lack of self-control responsible for the corruption of all. However, as Thomas Jordan’s prologue celebrating the first biologically female Desdemona in 1660 reminds us, the theatre profession itself was never completely above suspicion. Jordan speaks directly to the cultural anxiety created by a woman stepping out of her prescribed gender role: “‘Tis possible a virtuous woman may / Abhor all sorts of losseness, and yet play.” By pursuing the professional stage, an actress put her virtue up for public scrutiny and debate, enduring an examination that was not as concerned with assessing her professional talent as it was with evaluating her competency and constancy as a woman. Here Jordan suggests that the theatre is the corrupting influence, its “looseness” tempting women from the path of moral respectability and domesticity organic to female nature and represented, or course, by her sexual chastity. Yet, paradoxically, the perversion of the theatre has been blamed on women entering the profession, just as Adam was innocent until corrupted by Eve. Both scenarios, whether women are cast as the corrupters or the corrupted, point to a perceived
and perhaps irreconcilable incongruity in the relationship between actresses and their profession that calls into question female virtue.

In its scapegoating of women, this Edenic metaphor tellingly relieves male actors of moral responsibility, casting them as innocent and inevitable victims of female dissoluteness. As mentioned above, that the female-players are accused of becoming “abandoned” alludes to an imbalance and lack of female self-control, not necessarily exclusively sexual in nature—although certainly the sexual implication is there—but a threat nonetheless to the general “moral tone,” and specifically contaminating male respectability. Certainly this is part and parcel of the construction of women as hysterical beings, predisposed to excesses of feeling and temperament. Such a theory of female “excess” lends itself well to a patriarchal understanding of women in relation to a histrionic pursuit like acting. Even the actress’s professionalism is understood in a way that reinforces rather than mitigates the actress’s association with an excessive and lustful constitution: as opposed to the male actor, Straub notes that “the actress’s professionalism is usually articulated less in terms of skill or knowledge than in terms of a desire to ‘go on the stage.’ This desire—in other words, professional ambition—is represented as a refusal—or perversion—of ‘normal’ feminine sexuality.”

Historian John Harold Wilson “regretfully” concludes that the influence of the actress on the profession “was as good or as bad as the private character of the actress,” again emphasizing that the audience either could not or (more likely) refused to differentiate the player from the part. Wilson’s characterization makes it clear that this blurring contributed to the fun of spectatorship, since playgoers, armed with knowledge
of an actress’s moral character, “her past misdeeds and present liaisons,” would be “quick to see any incongruity between the reality and the stage make-believe.”\textsuperscript{11} An anecdote related by critic William Chetwood illustrates the “insider’s” role that the audience played in these moments as well as the dramatic effect—intentional or not—of this theatrical double-consciousness. At her exit in the third act of Nahum Tate’s \textit{King Lear}, Anne Bracegirdle reportedly received a round of applause when she delivered her parting line “Arm’d in my Virgin Innocence I’ll fly” because the actress’s reputation for chastity and living a moral life was in perfect accord with the virtuous Cordelia.\textsuperscript{12} On the other hand, when Elizabeth Barry performed the part, this same moment of heartfelt innocence received a hearty “Horse-laugh” from the audience, for the actress’s sexual exploits were common knowledge. Regardless of how well she might have been acting the part, the incongruity of Barry’s more libertine lifestyle and her character’s professed virginity turned to “Ridicule” a scene of “generous Pity and Compassion.”\textsuperscript{13} Elizabeth Howe rightly calls Chetwood’s story a “sorry tale concerning women,” also noting that it would be inaccurate to take this to suggest “that an actress of dubious reputation could never take a serious part without provoking laughter.”\textsuperscript{14} And while this is true, I come back to what murmurs in the background of Chetwood’s comparison: a female sexual binary that understands the actress as whore or not, a characterization of female virtue that impresses upon the entire performance.

The lore of the earliest actresses is a proven source of inspiration for many playwrights. Several nineteenth century plays resurrect notable individuals, performing a type of historical scholarship on women and theatre. The mysterious death of celebrated
French actress Adrienne Lecourvreur (1692-1730) inspired Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé’s *Adrienne Lecourvreur*. First presented in Paris in 1849, with Mlle Rachel (Rachel Félix) in the title role, the play images a complicated love triangle and Lecourvreur’s death by poisoning at the hands of her romantic rival. Later this same year, British playwright John Oxenford’s own version of the tragedy titled *Adrienne, the Actress; or, The Reigning Favorite* which only slightly modifies the intrigue of the French telling, premiered in London with Mary Anne Stirling in the title role, and subsequently toured the United States. The nineteenth century also saw a rekindling of interest in an ancient tale, the unlikely marriage of Emperor Justinian I and Theodora (c. 500-548). Novels reimagining their relationship appeared in many languages, affirming a cross-cultural fascination with a forbidden romance that transformed a hippodrome actress/whore into an Empress.¹⁵ Victorien Sardou’s play *Theodora*, premiered in Paris in December 1884, starred Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, and enjoyed a long run. It was revived many times, translated into other languages, as well as adapted many times into novel form.¹⁶ Less well-known, but predating Sardou’s adaptation is British playwright Watts Phillips’s *Theodora: Actress and Empress*. Produced in London in 1866, Phillips’s effort did not come close to matching Sardou’s success; however, the London production could not boast the talents of Sarah Bernhardt in the role of the “Empress of the Circus.”¹⁷

Anne Oldfield (1683-1730), one of the first of the English actresses,¹⁸ is the subject of Mildred Aldrich’s 1894 play *Nance Oldfield*. This one-act comically uncouples the actress from the woman, with a plot driven by a distraught father’s request that the
famous Drury Lane actress, the titular Nance Oldfield, get his son to fall out of love with her. Knowing full well that the son’s infatuation is with the onstage actress and not the hard-working career woman that takes her place once the curtain comes down, Oldfield puts on a performance of ordinariness that cures the son his obsession with the “real” Anne, while also, ironically, confirming his love of the theatre. It turns out the young man is an aspiring and talented poet, and the incomparable Oldfield is his actress-muse, another familiar trope in depictions of the actress. Charles Reade and Tom Taylor’s *Masks and Faces: or, Before and Behind the Curtain*, first produced at London’s Haymarket Theatre in 1852, is a similar but much more philosophical investigation into the power of female performance that seeks to uncover the “real” woman from the actress identity. The play’s actress heroine Peg Woffington (1720-1760)\(^{19}\) chooses to sacrifice her own happiness in order to put an end to an inappropriate romantic attachment. Peg is portrayed as intelligent, good-natured, and extremely generous. Forgoing more lucrative proposals from bigger-wigs, she falls for the simple, yet sincere, country gentleman Mr. Vane. After, however, Vane’s wife Mabel appears and is devastated to discover that her husband has fallen in love with another woman, Peg resolves to right the situation. She acts the part of a heartless schemer to redirect Vane’s affections back to his wife. Despite the many stage masks talented actresses may have at their disposal, Peg proves to be a true-hearted and honest woman. The moral of the story is that the illusion of the stage is just that; and one does players, especially actresses, a disservice to confuse the performer with the part.\(^{20}\)
While these aforementioned plays are not biographical per se, they are a type of history play inspired by the reputations, personalities, and professionalism of famous actresses. For the most part, contemporary plays about the Restoration theatre do not necessarily investigate the question of the actress. For example, the first act of William Davenant’s *The Playhouse to be Let*, performed in 1663, is set in the playhouse during vacation time, but the figure of the female performer is absent. The women characters are a Tire-Woman and a Char-Woman, while the theatre’s Player and House-Keeper are men. The group entertains a revolving door of applicants who inquire about renting the empty playhouse. This first act serves as an introductory, setting up the next four acts, each of which features one of the entertainments that has been brought in by a renter. The reappearance of the theatre’s Player and House-Keeper at the beginning of each new entertainment creates a sense of cohesion among the five distinct acts. It is likely Davenant’s comedy directly influenced the satire *The Rehearsal* by George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, which was written over a number of years beginning in 1663, but not performed until 1671. Sheridan Baker calls the play a “prototype” for this kind of farcical burlesque-rehearsal that explicitly comments on theatrical conditions, critiquing the practice and practitioners of its own period. Buckingham ridicules the vanity of authorship and heroic drama, specifically targeting John Dryden who is represented by the character of Bayes. And although they are minor characters, Buckingham’s dramatic world does contain actresses, which would be a faithful reflection of the period. Bayes announces that he has written a character especially for his mistress, a part played in *The Rehearsal* by Anne Reeves, who, it was presumed, was
actually Dryden’s mistress. So, in essence, Reeves “is playing her own comical counterpart as Bayes’s mistress, burlesquing the parts she had played in Dryden’s plays.” The actresses, however, only appear in the play in character, rather than as “themselves.”

Buckingham’s satire certainly owes a debt to Molière’s *The Rehearsal at Versailles*, a one-act written within a matter of weeks at the command of Louis XIV and first performed at Versailles in 1663. Since he used his own troupe as the model for his fictional one, there are several actress characters. Albert Bermel calls it “an opportunity for perfect typecasting, since the actors are either playing themselves or playing themselves *playing*.” Indeed, the play is cleverly self-reflexive, mirroring its own reality on many levels. It begins with Molière calling his company together to rehearse his new, still untitled play. The king arrives in two hours to see this new entertainment he has personally requested, but the performers are close to mutiny, for they have had no time to learn their parts. No one is happy, and they direct their frustration at their playwright-manager. Even Molière’s wife gives him a hard time, complaining that his choice of writing in prose has made the situation even more difficult. Mlle Molière comically takes another dig at her husband (and the fight they are currently having) when she says if she were to write a play she would take up the theme of marriage: “I’d explain away most of the faults women are accused of; and I’d the contrast between the crableness of a husband and the courtesy of a lover” (100). As early examples of plays-about-theatre, these three comedies are often mentioned together, as mutually influencing each other and the genre. Notably, even though the actress is part of the dramatic landscape, she
does not feature prominently in any of them. While the actress had certainly established herself as a theatre professional by this time, her point of view as an artist accorded little consideration in these plays about theatre. Molière’s comedy, however, does the best job at including a female point of view—notably, Mlle Molière expresses her creativity as a writer and not a performer, using playwriting against her playwright husband to comically champion wives against their husbands. The lack of gender parity in these plays is not surprising. It reaffirms that the men were the masters of the profession, that authorship was a male domain, and that masculine interests and tastes dominated the stage.25

Another type of theatre history play imaginatively recreates the actress origin story. Here Ben Orkow’s *The First Actress* (1976) stands out because it entertains the possibility that the first professional actress actually made her debut in the 1590s disguised as a boy, performing alongside Richard Burbage at the Globe Theatre in defiance of legal prohibitions against women on the stage. Felicia, an aspiring young actress, assumes the male identity of “Felix” in order to fulfill her dream of becoming an actress, after all the law must change at some point—“’Tis common sense, is’t not?” she reasons (41). A fortuitous turn of events creates the opportunity she needs to demonstrate her talent, and she quickly takes over the female roles for Shakespeare’s company. Felix absolutely triumphs in the role of Juliet. And by virtue of the “boy’s” stellar reputation, Queen Elizabeth demands a command performance at court. Buckling under the fear of being found out and punished for treason, Felicia reveals her true identity to the company, much to Burbage’s relief, since he has been comically fighting his feelings of
sexual attraction for the young Felix since their first meeting. Burbage convinces Felicia that they cannot ignore a royal command, and she agrees to play one last time—“Let us show those who have females forbidden upon the stage what they have been missing!” he exclaims (60). After the show Her Majesty sends gifts of appreciation to the troupe. The flowers she sends to “Master” Felix contain a card that makes it clear that she is “in” on the ruse—that she knows that a woman, not a boy, played Juliet. Yet she pardons the actress while at the same time definitively retiring her from the stage. The troupe rallies around the disheartened Felicia, remaining optimistic about the future for women on the stage—this battle may be lost but the war is not over.26

The 1990s saw a resurgence of interest, academic and artistic, in women’s theatre history and the legacy of the Restoration actresses, an outgrowth of the surge of feminist theatre and performance that thrived during the decades of feminism’s second wave. In addition to articles and book chapters, the early 90s saw the publication of two notable monographs: in 1992, Elizabeth Howe’s *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*, which specifically foregrounded and interrogated the actress origin story, and in 1993, Sandra Richards’s *The Rise of the English Actresses*, which, like the trajectory of St. John’s play that concludes its history with *An Actress of To-Day*, begins in the seventeenth century and concludes with a chapter that considers “The Recent Actress.” These histories seem to mark an influx of research on actresses. Not since John Harold Wilson’s 1958 *All the King’s Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* and before that Rosamond Gilder’s 1931 *Enter the Actress: The First Woman in the Theatre* had the
subject of the Restoration actresses or actresses in general generated this much serious academic inquiry.  

The 1990s also saw three plays that resurrected the Restoration stage and took up the actress origin story: De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* (1993), Stephen Jeffreys’s *The Libertine* (1994), and Jeffrey Hatcher’s *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* (1999). For Jeffreys and Hatcher, the professional triumphs of the newly minted actresses are not ends in themselves but a means to highlight the virtuosity and prestige of the actresses’ male benefactors, the libertine Earl of Rochester and the beloved but displaced “male-actress” Edward Kynaston, respectively. Rochester’s training of Elizabeth Barry as part of a wager figures prominently in Jeffreys’s drama, though, as the title would suggest, this is very much Rochester’s and not Barry’s play. Similarly, Kynaston’s training of Margaret Hughes to “be” rather than “play” Desdemona (as well as their actual performance of the bedchamber scene) is the emotional climax of Hatcher’s play; and it is Kynaston not Hughes who is the “compleat female stage beauty” of the play’s title. Jeffreys’s Rochester declares Barry “already the most fascinating actress on the London stage” (22). Still, with his training she shall truly transform: “I think I can make you an actress of truth, not a creature of artifice” (31). But the ambitious and talented Barry does not wish to be known as Rochester’s creation: “I am intent on doing something that no other has yet done . . . when I have my fame and my two pound a week—I am worth no less—that Lord Rochester touched me with the shining wing of his genius and made me into a little corner of his greatness, NO, I shall be valued for me, and for what I knew I could do upon this stage” (31). Barry becomes Rochester’s mistress, but tires of the role,
even though the earl professes his love for her and wishes for her to become his wife—the fact that he is already married does not seem to be an obstacle for him. Barry, however, knows her own mind, and does not want to be anyone’s anything: “I wish to continue being the creature I am,” she declares. “I am no Nell Gwyn, I will not give up the stage as soon as a King or a Lord has seen me on it and, wishing me to be his and his alone, will then pay a fortune to keep me off it” (77). Not even the fact that she is pregnant with Rochester’s child sways her.

Hatcher’s *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* comically credits Nell Gwyn with inspiring Charles II’s proclamation that “No He shall ere again upon an English stage play She” (46). We first meet young Nell at the king’s palace—she is already Charles’s “Pretty Witty Nell” (27), the king having plucked the fifteen-year old from the obscurity of playhouse orange-seller. She is in the middle of her court performance of “The Raging Dido.” Notably, she is costumed in nothing but gold high-heeled boots and a helmet, her shield the only thing preventing us from seeing her completely naked. Nell tries to audition at the Duke’s theatre, but Kynaston prevents her from being seen. Despite it being illegal for women to act, Margaret Hughes has already appeared as Desdemona at Killigrew’s theatre. Killigrew’s “surprise” has worked; his actress is selling out performances. Consequently, Kynaston has decided to exercise his right of final approval over all players employed at the Duke’s. And as the theatre’s player of women parts, he refuses to allow actresses into the company. Vowing her revenge against Kynaston for blocking her way, Nell turns to her lover, the king, for a small favor. When she whispers the favor into Charles’s ear, he recoils in shock: “Nell! I can’t. . . . It’s out of the
question” (42). However, Nell persists, buttering him up by turning him on, and then performing what we can only imagine is an exceptionally skilled act of fellatio which ends with the king’s onstage orgasm. Shortly thereafter, act one concludes with Charles presenting a new edict to Parliament, which he “wish[es] to have passed, put down in law and posted throughout the affected areas post-haste. . . . that all women’s parts be acted by women” (46).

De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures*, on the other hand, offers a fresh approach to the actress origin story by focusing exclusively on the female experience. By dramatizing contradictions fundamental to questions of female sexuality and autonomy, De Angelis interrogates the sexual politics of the era and the material conditions of playhouse employment, while resisting the moralizing that maintains that actresses had (in Allardyce Nicoll’s words) successfully “dragg[ed] down the playhouse.”28 She not only stages the actress but (re)writes her into women’s history. As a result, to return to this chapter’s epigraph, *Playhouse Creatures* performs a type of “history-making” that preserves as well as reinterprets the past in light of new questions. Gerda Lerner calls this a “social necessity,” especially for women who “have lived in a world in which they apparently had no history and in which their share in the building of society and civilization was constantly marginalized.”29 As Lerner writes, “It is through history-making that the present is freed from necessity and the past becomes usable.”30 The actress origin story becomes part of the usable past in De Angelis’s hands. *Playhouse Creatures* unearths the actress ghosts of theatre history as a means to envision a future built on a new feminist consciousness. Incidentally, in terms of imagining this future in
which women share equally in the building of society and culture, it is perhaps interesting to note that both *The Libertine* and *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* have been made into Hollywood films, but the woman-centered story of *Playhouse Creatures* has not yet found a life beyond the stage.\(^{31}\)

**April De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures***

It’s a popular profession with considerable advantages.
- Mrs. Farley in *Playhouse Creatures*, 1994\(^ {32}\)

In 1993, April De Angelis accepted a playwriting commission from The Sphinx Theatre Company (formally The Women’s Theatre Group) for a play about the first English actresses with an all-female cast.\(^ {33}\) As a professional actress-turned-playwright, feminist, and activist who had come of age in the 1980s working with the theatre collectives Monstrous Regiment and ReSisters, De Angelis’s background lent itself well to the assignment. While researching, De Angelis was surprised and disappointed to discover the subject of the first English actresses had received very little serious academic attention; seemingly, these women pioneers had been all but lost to conventional historical accounts. Only after she had crafted a first draft of the script did she become aware of Elizabeth Howe’s 1992 study *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*. Howe’s copiously researched history became an inspiration to De Angelis, and the first production of *Playhouse Creatures*, which opened on 5 October 1993 at the Haymarket Theatre Studio in Leicester (now closed), was dedicated to the late historian.\(^ {34}\) Using various methodologies, Howe meticulously chronicles the
considerable influence of the Restoration actresses as a separate and distinct group apart from their better-established and respected male counterparts, paying special attention to the affect women performers in female parts had on dramatic writing, characterizations, and theatre production from the reopening of the theatres at the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 until the end of the seventeenth century. While De Angelis has weaved into her plot several of the more spirited and strange incidents from history, she, of course, takes artistic liberties, especially with chronology. This history lends weight to De Angelis’s primary concern, which is capturing and critiquing the ethos of the period, specifically, the conditions and consequences of the actresses’ employment—financial, artistic, and sexual—in the theatre.

*Playhouse Creatures* is a drama in two acts, episodic in structure, and framed by a flashback. Its intersecting storylines, variations on the themes of female sexuality and identity, alternate between the professional and personal, that is, the onstage and backstage lives of the newly minted actresses, a distinction that becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The play’s actress characters range in age from sixteen to fifty and are all historical figures: Nell Gwyn (16), Mrs. (Mary) Betterton (50), Mrs. (Rebecca) Marshall (late 20s), and Mrs. (Elizabeth) Farley (early 20s). In addition to being in various stages of their acting careers, the actresses represent various stages of sexual maturity and appeal, and the question looms as to what extent age and sexual appeal are inextricably linked to a successful tenure on the stage. Farley confirms her sexual availability (but perhaps not her desirability) by using her acting career as a vehicle for self-promotion, an effort to procure longer-term employment and sanctuary as mistress to
a member of the aristocracy. On the other hand, Marshall’s professionalism stands in opposition to such sexual profiteering. Although still in her sexual prime, Marshall actively resists the whore label, averse to giving over control to a male keeper, a stand that makes business-as-usual difficult. And while the matronly Betterton is past her sexual prime—we see her try to adjust to life after her forced retirement from acting—the up-and-comer Nell proves to be “just right,” refreshingly playful but not a pushover, self-assured but not overly self-conscious, least of all about playing the whore, both on- and offstage.

Rounding out the cast of five is Doll Common, described simply as “an old woman.” A player of bit parts and Mrs. Betterton’s elderly and long-time dresser, Doll functions as a chorus-like character; her narrative and ongoing commentary lend wisdom, gravity, and wit to the proceedings. In true Restoration fashion a prologue, delivered by Doll, sets the scene. As has been discussed, one way actresses affected the Restoration stage was that the “theatre developed a ‘new’ brand of highly familiar, highly personalized prologue and epilogue” which “became an integral part of almost every production.” Rather than straightforward “pleas for a good reception of a particular drama” familiar to Renaissance audiences, this reformed brand of prologue “forged a new link between player and spectator” by tailoring its content to the specific personality, manner, and reputation of the player who was to deliver it, so that it “could only be spoken by that player. . . . Thus the new prologues and epilogues created theatrical moments when the players apparently abandoned their roles and stepped forward as ‘themselves’ to address spectators.” As the dramatic archive of the period attests,
women outnumbered men as speakers of prologues and epilogues.\textsuperscript{39} That this reformed, personalized formula seemed to be most successful, or perhaps just simply more entertaining, with an actress as the mouthpiece suggests possibly that the actresses “themselves” were of much greater general interest, a characterization which would be consistent with the novelty women actresses in plays offered to the theatre-going public. Actresses’ offstage reputations and personalities certainly made rich fodder for these speeches—it was an easy fit when, as women, actresses were more readily subjected to social scrutiny, gossip, and scandal. The “new link” between actress and spectator, forged within the performance of the prologue wherein the actress played “herself,” was an intimacy based predominately on a selective and provocative crafting of her real-life, and while this interlude existed completely outside of the dramatic world of the play being presented, its capacity and function to connect the audience to the drama through a specific actress also invariably informed the play’s reception.

The stage directions establishing the opening scene for \textit{Playhouse Creatures} indicate, “\textit{Doll Common enters. She is sixty or so. She seems a vagrant, timeless. She warms her hands at a small fire. She addresses the audience}” (1). Her prologue begins, “It is a fact that I was born. That is a fact. The how was in that old eternal way, but the when I shall not divulge. No, I’ll keep that hugged close to my chest like a sick cat” (1). To set the stage with this plain-spoken declaration of truth of Doll’s very existence announces, as scholar Özden Sözalan has written, “that the dramatist’s concern is with the broader socio-historical context in which female actresses were ‘born.’”\textsuperscript{40} Accordingly, Doll’s tone here is sobering rather than saucy; she continues philosophically
in the manner of a sage provoking introspection rather than that of a corner gossip: “Once this was a playhouse, and before that, a bear pit” (1), continues the sexagenarian who goes on to explain that when she was a child her father was the bear keeper. The entire prologue consists of Doll’s reminiscences. This first-person account of the history of the playhouse prepares us for the story of the first actresses by temporarily reorienting us to the female experience and point of view. That Doll functions as the repository of collective memory positions her as representative of the women “playhouse creatures” who inherited the stage, while her advanced age and unattractive presence that initially “seems a vagrant, timeless” provides a counterbalance to the play’s focus on a specific moment in theatre history for women where youth and bawdiness prevailed.

The prologue’s direct address dismantles the imaginary fourth wall, a theatrical convention that usually maintains the demarcation between the staged reality of the drama and the present social reality of its performance. Instead, De Angelis uses the prologue and the otherworldly dramatic frame to deliberately reorient the performer/audience relationship in order to acknowledge the shared (and haunted) performance space in which it exists. Doll’s use of the pronoun “this” in “Once this was a playhouse, and before that, a bear pit” (1) equates the present venue, its social reality and performative functions, with its theatrical antecedent, forging a contextual bridge to the past and, for the duration, rendering the extinct Restoration playhouse material.

Primary to Playhouse Creatures is the playhouse location setting, which not only situates us geographically, but is also the cultural and physical referent anchoring De Angelis’s metatheatrical dramaturgy. Further, place and its haunting provide nested
framing devices for De Angelis’s narrative, producing a dramatic and theatrical echoing that Marvin Carlson calls “ghosting.” In fact, *Playhouse Creatures* begins and ends with the actual ghosts of Doll and Nell Gwyn, who seem to be enduring a Godot-like perpetuity waiting for the epilogue that will finally conclude the performance and put an end to the proverbial actor’s nightmare of being trapped on a nondescript stage without any sense of purpose or direction.

As Doll’s prologue instructs, the playhouse has its own history: it used to be a bear pit. The actresses tread the boards on the same ground where countless bears were sacrificed to a violent national pastime, dancing for the whip and spilling their blood in the name of entertainment. In the prologue, Doll reminisces that “On a hot day, I swear you could still smell the bears,” and how her coworkers would tease her: “That ain’t the bears, Doll, that’s the gentleman!” (1). But Doll knew it was the bears because she would come upon tufts of bear hair while sweeping. That the playhouse yields material traces of its previous functional purpose suggests that in the recycling and remaking of the theatrical repository erasure is never complete. “Sometimes,” says Doll, “I still hear their cries, very faint and in the wind” (1). Although Doll is talking about the bears here, she just as well could be referring to the actresses who followed. The multiple hauntings of the bear pit turned playhouse seem to implicate the theatrical event itself, the *display* of animal ferocity and female sexuality the location’s common denominator; for it is the bears and actresses, the subjects of the theatrical spectacle, that maintain a residual presence in the space as if bound by (as well as bearing witness to) their own dramatic representations and theatrical objectification.
In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson convincingly demonstrates the primacy of memory in the theatrical experience. Carlson uses the term “ghosting” to explain how the present is always necessarily experienced in relation to ghosts of the past, in other words, to memories of previous experiences and associations which are constantly being recycled and reconstituted through the present (re)experience. The theatre, then, operates as a “memory machine,” and all of its elements—its texts, structures, locations, productions, and bodies—are subject to ghostings that inform reception. According to Carlson,

> Theatres operate on the public imagination in a different way than these other repositories [of cultural memory like libraries and museums], since they are not concerned with the preservation or display of historical artifacts or documents but, rather, with the preservation and stimulation of historical memory itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, the theatre building has often been viewed as a domain of ghosts.\(^{41}\)

Taking a punning cue from Ibsen, Carlson also suggests that “all plays in general might be called *Ghosts*, since, as Herbert Blau has provocatively observed, one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that *we are seeing what we saw before.*”\(^{42}\)

If, as Carlson suggests, the theatre building is always already a domain of ghosts, *Playhouse Creatures*’ central dramatic conceit of a haunted playhouse magnifies the theatre’s inherent ghostliness. The play intentionally foregrounds the stimulation and circulation of memory, concerned both with its transhistoricity and its limitations, part and parcel of its feminist critique of the male hegemony under which the business of theatre continues to operate. Further, *Playhouse Creatures*’ framing device pivots on
literal ghosts, actress characters that not only represent but re-perform the past in the present moment. Dramatically, the effect is not so much a return to what has come before, but a sense of never having left—the past resurrected in such a way as it resonates critically in the present moment. Adrienne Rich’s notion of revision is a helpful theoretical framework here illuminating the radicalism inherent in a feminist treatment of historical subjects, part of the arsenal fostering a feminist awakening:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.43

As a feminist history play Playhouse Creatures reexamines the cultural assumptions that impede female progress by creating a dialectical tension between the here and now and the there and then; between what has been achieved and what has yet to be achieved; between the past as it has been written and the present as it is being lived.

Certainly bear baiting is the central metaphor of the play: De Angelis suggests that actresses were simply the next creatures to take the stage and dance for their keep, ruled by the unseen hand of a male keeper. The play tasks itself with exposing the many forms of this keeper and the reach of this unseen hand. While the revisioning of old narratives is a feminist strategy to inform future directions, a mandate for change is never simple, and in Playhouse Creatures the future remains uncertain. Despite Nell and Doll’s attempt to present the play’s epilogue, in Playhouse Creatures it remains unspoken; accordingly, the performance never ceases, and the actresses must carry on, seemingly
caught in an endless loop of now defunct productions. The only thing that changes is the part—or does it? The trapped specters of Nell and Doll are a constant reminder of the first women professionals to serve in the theatre. They maintain a forced vigil over all theatrical production in the present until the time comes when actresses can be and say what they like. The ethereal voices that speak to Mrs. Betterton tell her “The waiting will not be for much longer” (38); she, of course, takes this to mean that “[a] great part” (38) is forthcoming. However, Doll, whose father was the bear keeper and taught her well the value of the whip, is skeptical: “How do you know they’re telling the truth? Voices can be tricksy” (38).

**Mrs. Farley and fornication**

Each actress grapples with the challenges of self-determination complicated by limited opportunities for social and financial advancement. As depicted in *Playhouse Creatures*, the theatre represents a new career opportunity for women where none had existed previously. Actresses were novel in the Restoration, and De Angelis imagines that a certain amount of confusion certainly surrounded the job description. The story of the flashback begins on a London street in summer 1670 with two women talking about the difficulties of earning a living. Farley, the daughter of a preacher who has recently died of the plague, tries to carry on “stamping out heathen decadence” (4), but hasn’t earned a cent with her admonitory speechifying: “Yeah, ye shall discover even the women at your hearth to be fornicators!” (4). Nell, on a break from serving “strong waters to the gentlemen” (5) at the Cock and Pie, offers Farley tips on working a crowd: “I sold oysters
with me sister,” says Nell. “We had a patter. Crowds like patter” (4). When Nell explains that you have to be cunning to get ahead, Farley is hesitant: “I think cunning is against my religion” (5). Nell offers to pay Farley to teach her a poem. She is after a job at the playhouse and needs an audition piece:

MRS FARLEY. The playhouse! That den of defilement! That pit of pestilence!
NELL. I’ve seen the ladies. They’ve got lovely dresses.
MRS FARLEY. Have they?
NELL. I’ve crept in the back. The candlelight shines their hair so their hair seems like flames. Glittering buckles on their shoes. Gold lace dresses.
MRS FARLEY. Lace! Do they fornicate?
NELL. Fuck knows. They speak poetry and walk about. (6)

The mere mention of the playhouse brings Farley’s automatic protestations; although, since Nell’s description is enticing enough to pique Farley’s interest, despite the possibility of fornication, her disapproval of the theatre seems to be more an echo of her father’s proselytizing than an expression of her own convictions. When Farley learns that the playhouse only needs one lady, she tells Nell to wait for her to return with a book of poetry for her lesson. It doesn’t take but a moment for Nell to realize she has been outsmarted—apparently cunning is not against Farley’s religion. Money is, after all, money.

The next time we see Mrs. Farley she is an actress performing “onstage” in an Amazon drama titled The Fatal Maiden: “The Lights come up on Mrs. Farley tied to a tree. She has been ‘despoiled’. She is still dressed sumptuously in comparison to the last time we saw her. She poses, and sighs pitifully” (7). This is the first of many instances of Playhouse Creatures’ play-within-the-play moments that showcase the actresses playing Restoration characters and scenes. Farley’s dialogue recounts her struggle against her
attacker and rapist; for the woman, it is a crime from which there is no recovery. “He panted with his foul desire / I am despoiled, so must expire!” (8), she exclaims before dying. Mrs. Betterton and Mrs. Marshall enter dressed as Amazons, carrying bows and arrows, fresh from avenging their queen, Penthisilea’s injurious treatment. Only they are too late to save her life, and both warriors “beat their breasts three times and after the third beat bare a breast each”: “O Penthisilea, we weep for thee / And bare our breasts after three” (8). This concludes the scene, and the three actresses take their bow and exit the stage.

This first scene that takes place in the playhouse location setting is of the actresses onstage acting the parts of Amazon warriors. In fact, this is the first time we meet the stage veterans Mrs. Betterton and Mrs. Marshall, and notably they appear to us in character, representing a legendary tribe of all-female warriors known for their strength and autonomy. By having this scene of performance serve as our introduction to the playhouse, De Angelis highlights the actresses’ professionalism as well as adopts this idealized, mythical vision of women’s sisterhood and fortitude as an overarching metaphor for the actress pioneers she takes as her subject. However, theirs is not a fairytale existence, and the analogy purposely falls short of its promise. Personal jealousies and professional rivalries undermine group cohesion among the actresses, and the ideals of female community and solidarity remain stage fictions. Further, any refuge offered by the stage fiction is limited. The actresses may act the parts of Amazons but the play’s brutal murder of the Amazon queen seems to render the entire collective vulnerable.
This first staging of performance is also deliberately sexually titillating. In one of her study’s most significant conclusions, Howe explains that “[t]he presence of women’s bodies on the stage encouraged lurid, eroticized presentations of female suffering, and was designed to tantalise, rather than to attack violent masculine behavior.”

Howe coined the phrase “couch scene” to describe playwrights’ staged displays of the actress’s female body, a dramaturgical strategy she finds employed throughout the Restoration. “Here female characters were directed to lie at a distance, asleep on a couch, bed or grassy bank where, attractively defenceless and probably enticingly déshabillée, their beauty unwittingly aroused burning passion in the hero or villain who stumbled upon it.”

By extension, Howe’s point is that the male spectators in the audience presumably derived a similar voyeuristic pleasure. The discovery of the victimized Farley helplessly tied to a tree in a post-sexual attack, disheveled and exposed state exemplifies the eroticization and sexual objectification of the actress characteristic of the popular couch scene conceit.

De Angelis goes one step further in critiquing how female sexuality can be manipulated dramaturgically by having the two Amazon warriors bare their breasts. Within the dramatic context, the bearing of breasts masquerades as a warrior’s tribute to a fallen queen. However, it furthermore unambiguously announces the actresses as women, a peek-a-boo confirmation of the female sex that plays on the legend that Amazon women removed their right breast to aid in their mastery of weaponry. This moment of striptease arguably neutralizes the Amazon character as a symbol of female empowerment. Instead, character becomes a pretense for nudity, exposing (literally) the
Amazons as actresses and the actresses as merely women. But this might be overstating the case, which is perhaps De Angelis’s point. Central here is that this first performance includes a piece of stage business that has the actresses expose themselves sexually. While it seems as if this gesture differs from the passive display of the couch scene, De Angelis shows that it is just another means to the same end of sexual objectification characteristic of Restoration drama and playhouse antics.

Throughout *Playhouse Creatures* De Angelis inserts the performance of scenes that at first glance appear to be lifted directly from the repertory of seventeenth century drama. These “onstage” theatricals are one of the many charms of the play. The actresses perform a scene from John Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Wife* as well as recognizable pieces from two of Shakespeare’s tragedies—the Scottish Queen is a motif. In contrast, however, *The Fatal Maiden* with its Amazons (discussed above) and other performed pieces of plays within the play proper—and these include a prologue recited by Doll, an epilogue by Nell, and a breeches scene wherein Nell and Marshall address the audience and boldly ask for company shares as compensation for “playing for your pleasure” (36)—are unattributed in De Angelis’s script because they have been written by De Angelis herself.46 This reveals a strategy of invention as well as citation on De Angelis’s part. Regarding the question of sampling extant material, Ryan Claycomb points out that “almost all of the passages acted onstage are re-written by de Angelis herself,”47 even those pieces where the original authorship is clear. By staging (modified) extant drama with newly written text designed to suggest period drama, De Angelis highlights not only her own authorial voice but also the textual frame within which the Restoration actresses
operated. By “rewriting” the popular character types and dramatic tropes in which the actresses made their professional mark, De Angelis certainly, as Claycomb points out, inserts a contemporary metacommentary that reflects upon the historical actresses’ social and professional status; however, I would add that she does not do this simply by authoring lines, but by creating characters and behavior—by, in fact, staging the actress’s body. Herein lays the contemporary playwright’s strategy of metatheatrical performance and the power of De Angelis’s text to critique the predominately male-authored representations that facilitated and limited professional progress for the Restoration actresses, a strategy which at the same time acknowledges how these women were both empowered and sexualized by their subjective position as performers. The effect, as Claycomb notes, is a “consolidation of female voice: contemporary actresses reciting lines written by a contemporary female playwright, lines that reflect the lives of the female characters whose voices this play is resurrecting.”

After the Amazons exit, the stage direction notes of Farley, “As an actress she is transformed from the first demure sighting we had of her” (8). In fact, Farley is in her element, earning applause and money. Covetous of the rewards of her new profession, she has become its gatekeeper, determined to protect her situation and maintain the status quo by discouraging (even undermining) the competition, especially Nell, whom she finds particularly threatening. “The theatre has to have some standards,” she reasons. “If it didn’t, where would I be? Begging or starving” (9), a foreshadowing of Farley’s own fall. She opposes Nell at every turn, at one point embarrassing her by making fun of her petticoat, a way of telling Nell she has no worth to the profession. Laughing and pointing,
Farley tells Nell, “People don’t want to pay to see that. That’s like paying to see a dishcloth. An actress has to have the correct accoutrements. That’s French” (21). Nell’s grey cloth petticoat apparently makes her unfit actress material, while Farley’s imported silk petticoat, a gift “From an admirer” (21), sets the standard for stage work. Farley’s emphasis on outward appearance caters to the male gaze, and the fetishizing of the undergarment reinforces the sexual objectification of the actress.

Both women have struggled and know the theatre is a precious opportunity. As Farley says, “It’s a popular profession with considerable advantages” (9). Among those advantages for Farley is special attention from the king, the giver of the silk petticoat who has promised shoes next. But Farley’s access to the King by way of the palace’s special back stairs is short-lived. Her next rendezvous is abruptly cancelled, and she is dismissed with no other message than a parting gift of a coin which, to add insult to injury, comes to her through her rival Nell’s hand.

In Act II, Farley is visibly pregnant. Unable to corset herself so as to hide her condition, Mrs. Betterton delivers the bad news that Farley is no longer fit to do her job as an actress: “It is impossible. Mr Betterton will not have it. He cannot. We could lose our licence. To be that way on a public stage. There are laws. . . . If we were all as careless as you, the theatre would have to close down” (41). Without anyone to turn to or anywhere to go, Farley tries to reverse her situation so that she may retain her employment, calling on the actresses to perform an abortion. Using the costume brooch of a queen as a medical instrument, the actresses brace Farley for the procedure. The pain, however, is too much to bear, and Farley is unable to proceed. “Before I go. Would
any of you ladies care to purchase a petticoat?” asks Farley. “Well fashioned and stitched. It’s pure silk. French” (43). When there are no takers, Farley accuses the actresses of being superstitious, admonishing them: “It’s hardly worn!” (43). Nell is the only one to show her some kindness, buying the petticoat but refusing to actually take the garment from her. Marshall is doubtful: “How long are you going to live off a petticoat?” Farley’s parting words sound a warning: “Maybe you should have a care. Maybe your luck will run out” (44). But this is exactly what sets Marshall apart: she does not want to have to depend on luck to make a living, which is understood by the actresses as courting male attention and personal favor. Rather, Marshall wants to be able to work and support herself without having to augment her income with extravagant gifts from admirers. “A petticoat never saved anyone” (44), Marshall observes.

In Farley’s next and final appearance, she is making her living as a common streetwalker. “She looks ill, dirty, bedraggled, weak. She is clad in her petticoat, which is dirty, ragged” (48). She confesses that she has since abandoned her child “on some steps” (49). She has taken up a position outside of the playhouse soliciting men as they exit the performance. She offers up her body for any pleasure, and her patter advertises the possibilities: “Two pence. Two pence. I do anything. You can punch me. Look! (She shows her arms, which are bruised)” (48). But she is having no luck, and she blames her former colleagues inside the theatre for failing to sufficiently titillate the men: “It’s not me. It’s them. They’re not doing their job properly. The blokes aren’t coming out excited. They’re coming out limp. They’re not coming out looking for it. I should be in there. Not outside” (48). Ironically, it is on the street where Farley says she has finally truly
mastered the actress’s craft: “Thing is, I’m better now. Better than I was. That’s the pity of it. I’ve learnt things out here. The art of performance. You can’t act tired, not for business purposes. You’ve got to act like you like it. Love it even. You learn that. Out here I’m a real pro” (49). Of course, now Farley’s professionalism carries a double meaning.

With Farley, De Angelis shows us the lowly streetwalker whose only currency is her body—the woman who must hustle clients to survive. Farley has been stripped down to her silk petticoat; the underskirt, no longer the foundation supporting the layered ensemble of outward fashionable respectability, instead stands on its own as the fetishized costume of the common whore. Formerly symbolic of her prospective financial and social elevation as mistress to the king, the shabby undergarment now only broadcasts her destitution and, perhaps more damningly, her failure as a courtesan. Notably, Farley holds on to a sense of pride in her abilities as a performer, taking comfort in her professionalism. By couching the art of seduction as well as the sex act itself in performative terms, Farley’s rhetoric “highlights the legitimate labor involved in sex work.” While this discourse advantages the prostitute, it potentially stigmatizes the actress, since it equates “the art of performance” with the performer’s sexual availability, defining the actress by what she is willing to do with her body.

Farley’s condemnation of the actresses for “not doing their job properly”—for not adequately sexually exciting their male audience—once again brings up the question of the actress’s job description. What are the terms of the unspoken contract between (male) patrons and (female) performers in the playhouse? What does the price of admission
purchase? As an employee of a company of players, the actress’s job did not require that she fornicate—to use Farley’s word—but even so, the sexually-charged atmosphere of the playhouse promoted whorish behavior on and off the stage, blurring the already thin distinction between actress and prostitute and real and stage life. The unwanted pregnancy that precipitated Farley’s fall from the legitimate stage and a living wage to a hand-to-mouth existence on the street foregrounds the importance that the actress be perceived as sexually available as well as the actress’s precarious role of worker/employee.

**Nell Gwyn: A room of her own**

While the fairy tale ends abruptly and tragically for Farley, opportunity and good fortune seem to follow Nell. The teenaged orange-seller-turned-actress epitomizes the rags-to-riches Cinderella story, including the privileging of domesticity over other avenues of personal fulfillment for a woman. Although Nell achieves an unprecedented level of success as an actress, in the end she chooses the comforts of home and the possibility of children with Prince Charming rather than continuing to work for gender equality in her profession. Two things complicate Nell’s fairy-tale ending: the degree to which her professional success hinged upon her sexual availability, and the notion that her happily-ever-after was contingent upon her royal whoredom.

After Farley steals her audition out from under her, Nell does eventually find her way to playhouse employment as an orange seller. But Nell is far from satisfied; she sees herself as an actress and will not be deterred from making this vision of her future a
reality. Naively, Nell persists in trying to enlist Farley’s help to break into the profession; in turn, Farley is as discouraging as possible. In a self-aggrandizing way, she tries to convince Nell that she is not actress material, and this coming from the woman who not too long ago condemned the theatre as a “pit of pestilence” (6):

MRS FARLEY. I’ve told you you’ve got to have the right way about you and you just haven’t got it.
NELL. What way?
MRS FARLEY. You’ve got to have a bit of breeding. Elegance. Class. Dancing. You’re selling oranges. What more do you want?
NELL. I hate oranges. What about me poem?
MRS FARLEY. You’re never satisfied. That’s your trouble. My advice is to forget it. You don’t want to lead a life of disappointment, do you?
NELL. I’m going to ask Mr. Betterton. I’ll get someone else to tell us a poem, and I’ll say that and show me legs. (9)

After Farley scoffs at this idea, Nell finally realizes that Farley is no friend of hers: “You don’t want me to be one—an actress” (9), she pronounces. Further, she is insulted by Farley’s condescending “You’ll thank me one day” defense, to which she retorts “I fucking won’t” (9-10). Since Nell’s talent as an actress is yet unproven, Farley’s campaign against Nell is more about keeping a much younger (and sexier) woman off the stage and by extension off the market, thus limiting the competition for male attention.

Her efforts repeatedly thwarted by Farley, Nell shows initiative when she approaches Mrs. Betterton with a tall tale. “I said a poem,” she tells Mrs. Betterton. “I said it and Mr. Betterton said I was to have a go. Saying something” (16). Not being one to contradict her husband, Mrs. Betterton takes the bait. After establishing that Nell has rural experience—Nell confirms her mother kept a hen—she offers the newcomer the part of “the lusty shepherdess” and its one line: “Here stroll I the live long day /
Watching my fellows fork the hay” (17). Nell’s first attempt at reciting the line is terrible.
“It is very flat and mumbled. It stops Mrs. Betterton in her tracks” (17). In her grand manner, Mrs. Betterton instructs the novice actress: “Never underestimate the value of opening one’s mouth while speaking. One may go a long way in the theatre with an open mouth,” to which Doll quips, “And not just in the theatre” (17). Such sexual double entendres play on playhouse bawdiness and lampoons the actress as a sexual opportunist and whore.

Nell’s acting debut two scenes later is a mixed success. In this unnamed scene—one of the pieces of Restoration drama invented by De Angelis—a suicidal Marshall, dagger at the ready, calls upon the Muses for advice. After Doll, Betterton, and Farley enter as the Muses, Nell in the character of “the lusty shepherdess” makes her appearance. Betterton asks the shepherdess if she “May take shelter at your bower / And while away the cold night hour?” (23). Instead of the correct reply, “There is a dreadful silence. Nell gives a wail” (23). When recuing fails to snap Nell out of her daze, the actresses exit, leaving a dumbfounded Nell alone on the stage. “Nell seems frozen. After a while she begins to dance a jig. She gets livelier, warming to her task. The audience warm to her. She dances off, triumphant” (23).

Meanwhile, there is a backstage hullabaloo; the actresses rail because Nell’s incompetence has made them all look foolish. This leads Farley to reveal that Nell lied her way into the part, which greatly distresses Mrs. Betterton, who frets she has inadvertently defied her husband’s authority: “I have gone over his head by misadventure. Lord! Lord!” (24). It is potentially a costly mistake because, as Doll is quick to remind Mrs. Betterton, the king just happens to be in attendance today. But all is
not lost. When a “dazed” (24) Nell finally appears backstage, she explains how, after being abandoned onstage, she managed to recover from her stage fright and turn the restless and hostile crowd around:

Everything swayed as if it was wind in a forest and people were hissing and that was like the sound of wind. And I felt like a small thing that the wind was carrying, carrying somewhere, away, far away. . . . Then a thought came into my head like a shout. It said do something and fucking hurry up about it. So I danced a little jig which I made up on the spot out of my head and slowly all the whistling, hissing, stopped, and then someone started to clap, and then they all clapped. Laughed and clapped. (25)

An impressive recovery, Nell’s ability to improvise wins over the audience. Laughter and applause have earned Nell “[a] reprieve!” (25). Mrs. Betterton tells Nell that Mr. Betterton “may even keep you.” She is amused and relieved: “All for a jig. Well, well, it has not turned out too badly” (25).

As it turns out Nell’s instinct to “show me legs” was spot on. Her jig was such a hit that the enthusiastic crowd is slow to settle down. The stage directions indicate “Sounds are heard from outside” the tiring room. Noticing the lingering disturbance in the auditorium Doll astutely assesses the situation: “That’s what they’re like, animals. (She nods towards Nell) They get a sniff of it and they go wild” (25). A repetition of the animal imagery of her prologue, Doll uses animal metaphors throughout the play to describe the sexual dynamics of the playhouse, specifically predatory male behavior cued by the staging of the female body; thus, female performance invites the “sniffing” out of female sexual availability. And even though Nell failed to perform the part of the lusty shepherdess as written, she nevertheless wowed in her performance and was at the very least the object, if not the subject—as indicated by her character name—of lust. In De
Angelis’s depiction, Nell launches her stage career by showing her legs and figure, again emphasizing how the mere presence of the female body on the stage is necessarily alluring and consumed for its eroticism by the male spectator. Nell’s jig was more than a dance, it was a spectacular flirtation designed to spark charm and provoke. An actress was born, and, ironically, she did not even have to open her mouth.

It seems Farley’s insecurities were justified: Nell’s natural charms, self-deprecating manner, and comical stage debut captures the attention of the most illustrious and powerful man in the country. Nell describes the experience of being held by the audience’s gaze: “I did not mind the faces. I liked them. Like warm moons shining at me” (25). One bright face in particular made itself known to her from among the many: a man in a special box, who wore glitter, and cheered loudly, she recalls. To Farley’s chagrin, Nell’s performance, as well as she herself as a performer, has been sanctioned by none other than the king, whose attendance this day at the playhouse was supposed to honor Farley. “He couldn’t have been cheering” (26), Farley protests.

Soon after, the royal messenger who uses Nell to deliver the king’s “parting gift” of a coin to Farley also leaves Nell with a special invitation. In a confessional tone, Nell tells Doll that the messenger “said there is a carriage outside and I may use it at my own convenience. The special stairs… What do you think, Doll? The King” (34). Characteristically, Doll is less than supportive: “It don’t matter what anyone does, we all end up dead meat, don’t we?” (34), a droll reference to the purgatorial existence from which Nell and Doll have emerged to tell this story. Nell decides to go for it; after all, it is the king calling. She is, however, determined that this will be a special one-night only
performance: “Anyway, I decided. I’ll go. Just this one, mind. I’m an actress, not a tart” (34). Nell is careful to make the distinction between actress and tart because she has professional ambitions and wants to be perceived as a bona fide artist and not merely a sexual commodity. The king’s offer of a carriage and the private stairs as well as the payoff Farley receives for services rendered certainly casts Nell in the role of a kept woman, a harlot for hire. Regardless of its acceptance, such an offer muddies the actress waters, aligning the job of actress with that of fricatrice, implying that the actress is also necessarily a sexually available and willing woman. What’s more, as her witty comment makes clear, Nell is fully aware of the trap of public perception as well as the fact that as an actress she must negotiate its influence. Such a high-profile liaison, however, does have its perks, which would work to the actress’s advantage. Beside personal favor, the staging of an actress who is in real life a royal mistress has undeniable box office appeal. But the danger here is in having her personal life completely overtake her professional one, so much so that her success on the stage is attributed to her offstage sexual exploits and her connection to political power and influence, rather than to her creativity and talent. That history tells us Nell Gwyn left the stage to become King Charles II’s “Protestant whore,” as she once famously called herself, lends a certain dramatic irony to the decision Nell makes here. In the choice between actress and tart, it is the word “tart” that punctuates the end of Act I and overshadows Nell’s tenure in the theatre.

In Act II, Nell is an established and popular actress, earning what we imagine is a good living. She is, after all, the only one who kindly offers to buy Farley’s petticoat from her, an act of charity to the woman who once blocked her way. Although the
passage of time is not clearly marked in the play, one measure of Nell’s professional progress is the actress’s appointment along with Marshall to the position of shareholder in the King’s Company. Farley’s shameful fall and Mrs. Betterton’s retirement from the profession leave Nell and Marshall to carry on. It is Marshall who brings the amazing news:

MRS MARSHALL. Nell, we are no longer hirelings.
DOLL. Starlings?
MRS MARSHALL. Hirelings. Hirelings. (To Nell) Me and you, Nell. We are shareholders.
NELL. Fuck!
MRS MARSHALL. It has been agreed. We have shares. (50)

Doll’s comical confusion over what the actresses are or are not introduces yet another animal reference into the playhouse menagerie. Notwithstanding the punning on the word “star,” mistaking the actresses for “starlings” is not altogether inappropriate: in feminist literature and art birds often symbolize women, and here the glossy, gregarious songbirds of the Old World are a fitting stand in for the actresses. The sport of bird watching is an apt metaphor for the activity of spectatorship that takes place for the pleasure of the observer within the theatrical experience. Such a metaphor also reinforces the idea of the stage as a hunting ground, a target rich environment where actresses in performance are consumed and marked by the male gaze.

The opportunity to cast off the label “hireling” represents unprecedented freedom for the actresses, and their enfranchisement as shareholders is a political victory for women. Marshall believes with this elevation to shareholder she and Nell will finally have true freedom of choice—the freedom to forge new paths and control their own destinies. Hitherto the actresses have lived at the professional mercy of men, the self-
appointed masters of the craft. After toasting their victory, though, Marshall is surprised when Nell says that she will not cancel her rendezvous at the palace this evening. “Things have changed, Nell. As fast as that” says Marshall, trying to convince her friend and colleague that she no longer needs to rely on a male benefactor, even the king, for professional security: “The point is, you can choose. That’s the point. You don’t have to go” (50). Nell’s response, “I want to bloody go” (51), in the face of such a feminist victory, leaves Marshall deflated and confused. Trying to make sense of Nell’s decision, Marshall asks her if she is in love, true love being perhaps the one acceptable reason that would justify Nell’s behavior for Marshall. Although Nell is skeptical about love per se, she is admittedly captivated by the king’s “[l]ovely black hair” (51). While she is reluctant to give up what she has, which for Nell includes being the king’s mistress, neither does she take her good fortune for granted. She is young and seeks experience and adventure; she attempts to explain this in terms of her decision to continue to visit the palace, while also deflecting the question love:

NELL. Love? Going there. It’s exciting. I’m sixteen. I want to try things. New things. I’m lucky. I’ve always been lucky. People say I’m beautiful, but so are lots of girls. So why me? Why me and the King? Luck. That’s all. I get what I want. I always have. I had my own oyster stall at eleven. I have this thing I do. I imagine. I imagine what I want and then I get it. Somehow I get it. It just seems to go on and on and on. And I became an actress and I got the King. (51)

Nell tries to make it clear that she knows she is not necessarily special or more deserving than other women. According to Nell, what sets her apart is she imagines her own good fortune, which becomes a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. Excitement is all well and good, but Marshall’s point is that Nell imagines the wrong things.
After a fire destroys the King’s Company’s playhouse, Nell defects to the rival Duke’s Company, where she gets set up in a private tiring room, a room of her very own. Nell is very eager to show off her new, exclusive-use accommodation to Doll and Mrs. Betterton, whom, since her retirement, Nell has been employing as an acting teacher:

NELL. Well?
DOLL. “Well”, what?
NELL. Ain’t you noticed?
DOLL. Noticed?
NELL. I’m on me own.
DOLL. Oh yeah.
NELL. I have my own room. To myself. (54)

Rather than impressed, Doll is confused as to why Nell would choose to isolate herself:

DOLL. Innit lonely?
NELL. No. It’s private.
DOLL. What do you want to be private for?
NELL. Sometimes I receive guests.
DOLL. Guests! More like earls from the looks of ’em. (54-55)

A private dressing room is certainly a symbol of status in the playhouse. But for the actress the private receiving of guests also suggests the possibility of an illicit sexual encounter. In this sense, like Farley’s silk petticoat, a private room is just another accoutrement of the actress, assisting her in performing her job to an acceptable standard. The private accommodation seems even less of a professional achievement than a constraint when Nell reveals that she does not have shares at the Duke’s. “Still, I’ve come a long way, ain’t I?” (55), she insists. This response, taken in the context of her present situation as it has been skillfully gleaned by Doll, resonates with the double entendre contained in Betterton’s early elocution instruction to Nell, “One may go a long way in the theatre with an open mouth” (17).
Indeed, Nell has come a long way in the theatre, from orange seller to actress to main attraction at the Duke’s. She has firmly established herself as one of the most popular and desirable actresses of the day. Although Nell may not see it this way, the ultimate measure of her success is not the king’s patronage or a private dressing room but the offer of a part written especially for her by an emerging female playwright:

NELL. *(She picks up some parts)* Look.
DOLL. What is it?
NELL. It’s a play.
DOLL. I’m sick of plays.
NELL. It has a part for me. Especially written for me.
DOLL. What’s someone want to write a part for you for?
NELL. Because I am a shining light upon our stage.
DOLL. And I’m the Queen of Sheba’s uncle.
NELL. That is what she said when she put the part into my hands.
DOLL. Who?
NELL. Mrs. Behn. She is the author. (55)

While Doll is unfazed, Betterton comes to life upon hearing Nell’s news:

MRS BETTERTON. A part written for Nell!
DOLL. *(to Nell)* You started her off now! *(To Mrs Betterton)* A lady did it.
MRS BETTERTON. Can they write plays?
DOLL. She has.
MRS BETTERTON. Is it performable?
NELL. Don’t be old-fashioned.
DOLL. Mrs. B is old-fashioned.
MRS BETTERTON. That is correct. You many blame longevity. (55)

As one of the first women to break through the gender barrier in the professional theatre, Betterton is certainly aware of the gender inequality in her profession. While Betterton’s surprise at a female writer is appropriate, for there is no precedent for professional women playwrights, it is her prejudicial attitude against a woman’s qualifications as a dramatist that is more telling. Her quizzical investigation, which moves from questioning whether women are even capable of writing plays to the assumption that a woman-
authored play is surely unactable, reveals a lack of sympathy or support for Behn, for which Nell accuses her of being “old-fashioned.” Indeed, Betterton is part of the old guard, while Nell is the “shining light” of the present. Ironically, Betterton, once a trailblazer, is now the mouthpiece for the status quo. Her attitude towards Behn reinforces the divide between the performance and the written word upon which it is based: while acting is a suitable occupation for women, letters and language is still the exclusive domain of men. Jacqueline Pearson explicates this bias and its effect on the theatre profession: “It seems that male players were felt to have an authority denied to their female colleagues. They could be men of letters, controlling language on their own account as well as using the language of others. Actresses were simply the mouthpieces of words they had hardly ever written.”

53 If Betterton represents the past and Nell represents the present, the suggestion is that the future is represented by the combination of Nell and Behn, of two women working together. The yet unrealized potential of a woman playwright writing specifically for the most popular actress of the day speaks to the future dawning of a never before represented female perspective in the theatre.

In this final meeting between Betterton and Nell, there is a changing of the guard, which begins with Betterton’s acknowledgment of Nell’s professional accomplishments. Returning to the above exchange, Betterton accepts that she is old-fashioned; she also congratulates Nell on her success and admits she would like to believe her mentoring played a role:

MRS BETTERTON. You know, you have done quite well for yourself.
NELL. Yes, I have.
MRS BETTERTON. Quite well indeed. I should like to think that I had a hand in it. A little hand in it.
NELL. You did. You did.
MRS BETTERTON. Now you are opening your mouth with competence.
(Nell gives a short laugh) (55)

This declaration is the long-awaited punch-line of one of the play’s running jokes. Even though it is Betterton who lands the line, she is without a doubt the straight man here, the laugh partly at the expense of her old-fashioned sincerity. Contrary to what Betterton may think, proper elocution is not Nell’s only virtue; and while her diction may have required training, Nell was already very proficient at opening her mouth. Nell, of course, gets the joke; as an actress and mistress, she is well-versed in sexual innuendo, and it is just like Nell to be able to laugh at herself. But the best jokes do have a kernel of truth in them, and Betterton’s inadvertent satire has landed squarely at Nell’s door. With the king at her side on the one hand and a private tiring room to receive “guests” on the other, the actress who was once distressed about the actress/tart dichotomy seems to have reconciled it to her advantage.

Nell’s dismissal of Betterton’s services completes the changing of the guard; it also takes away Betterton’s last connection with the theatre. “I don’t want any more lessons” (56), declares Nell, stopping Betterton in the middle of a demonstration on how to affect affectation. At first Nell’s decision seems a hasty reaction to Doll’s pushy insistence for payment in hand: “Come on, come on, Where’s our shilling. We ain’t doing it for nothing” (56). Nell’s banter with Doll betrays a frustration with the old woman’s teasing:

NELL. I always pay, don’t I?
DOLL. You was gutter born and bred, and them sort don’t change.
MRS BETTERTON. A decent performance may be utterly ruined by the players insistence on adopting a false and irritating character trait.
NELL. You’re getting above yourself.
DOLL. You is above yourself.
MRS BETTERTON. This often manifests itself in the laugh. (*She laughs in an irritating manner*)
DOLL. You are privileged to be in the presence of Mrs. B’s presence.
NELL. Am I? (56)

Doll pushes Nell’s buttons in this exchange, attempting to reinscribe the social order by humbling Nell in front of her benefactress, the displaced Mrs. Betterton. Indeed, it is Nell who now plays opposite Mr. Betterton on stage at the Duke’s, while Mrs. Betterton must occupy herself with teaching instead of doing. But Nell is not acting impulsively or selfishly here, which would be completely against her character; she has her own reasons for dissolving this arrangement with Betterton: she is quitting the profession and no longer requires acting lessons. “He says he will buy me a house. A whole house. If I leave,” blurts Nell. “It will have a large park attached. Plus a couple of peacocks, a footman, cutlery, plate, silver salvers, a necklace, half a hundred weight of linen, best linen, and the loan of a horse and carriage.”

MRS BETTERTON. That is a lot.
DOLL. That is a fucking fortune.
MRS BETTERTON. Yes, I can see that is a fucking fortune. It would be hard to turn down, I can see that. (57)

The king offers Nell the trappings of an aristocratic life. To claim this prize, though, she must give up her professional career and financial independence, exchanging her stage celebrity and public persona for domesticity and financial dependency. While Nell may have come “a long way,” her journey seems to end with her taming. Notwithstanding the temptation of the “fucking fortune” laid at her feet, Nell’s royal whoredom becomes less clear cut when she explains her decision:
NELL. I’m not going because of what you think.
DOLL. Ain’t you?
NELL. No. I had a feeling.
DOLL. What you on about?
NELL. I never had it before. In my gut. Like there was something there.
       Something curled up. Something ready to spread round my whole body.
DOLL. (to Mrs. Betterton) What’s she on about?
NELL. I never had it before. Not like that. A feeling.
MRS BETTERTON. Fear.
NELL. Yes. That’s what it was. Fear. I woke up and then suddenly I
       couldn’t imagine what comes next.
DOLL. What’s happening?
NELL. I tried to imagine but I couldn’t.
Pause
       Nothing. If I stay here I’ll just grow old and then what?
Pause
       A house with a park. Children.
Nell exits
DOLL. Bloody hell. (57-58)

Not surprisingly, it is Betterton who recognizes and names Nell’s “feeling.” After a
distinguished career, the veteran actress finds she is facing the void—the empty future—
of which Nell speaks. Having given her life over to and grown old in the theatre,
Betterton’s professional accomplishments are of little comfort now. Her years of service
did not prevent an unceremonious exit from the boards, orchestrated by her husband to
make way for younger, more attractive women. Without her profession, she has lost her
sense of purpose; and except for Doll, she is alone. If Mrs. Betterton’s fate is any
indication, it is not unreasonable for Nell to fear that the acting profession holds no future
comfort for her. Thus, even though she is still young and enjoying a thriving career, Nell
bids farewell to the theatre, leaving on her own terms rather than subjecting herself to the
slow fade inflicted upon her mentor Betterton. Despite Doll’s exasperated “Bloody hell,”
Nell’s exit is anticlimactic; instead, the circumstances motivating her departure thwart
expectations and leave us feeling ambivalent about the future as well. The changing of
the guard here is incomplete; there is no clear passing of the baton from the older to the
younger generation, or rather Nell, Betterton’s rightful heir, refuses the responsibility. If
fame is the measure of success, Nell has surpassed her predecessor and mentor, but
unlike Mrs. Betterton, she will never become a truly respected actress, a guardian of her
craft, or an artistic example to the next generation of actresses. By prematurely leaving
the theatre, Nell fails to fulfill the promise of her “shining light” upon the stage, a
promise of a brighter future for women in her profession, including women playwrights
like Behn.

Nell’s choice to quit the theatre can certainly be read from the position of female
empowerment, as Nell attempting to exercise control over her own destiny. Seeing no
future in the theatre, she reaches for the financial and emotional security offered by the
king. That his patronage has been a factor in her professional success, however,
complicates the notion of Nell’s autonomy here, calling into question the actress’s sense
of obligation to her benefactor and whether this outcome was inevitable from the start. Is
the actress only on loan until her patron decides to recall her from the public eye? On the
other hand, Nell’s self-imposed exile can also be read as her selling out. Instead of
continuing to forge new paths for women in her profession, she takes the easier, more
traveled route that subjects her to a domestic existence, reifying the trope that women,
even the most ambitious, secretly want a man to rescue them. By walking away from the
theatre she abandons all the would-be Nells who hoped to follow her onto the stage and
benefit from her experience and influence, as she benefitted from Mrs. Betterton’s
mentorship. Taking on the real-life part of royal mistress full-time is no stretch for Nell; it is a part that was already hers, and will afford few new challenges. And like the job of actress before it, the job of courtesan comes with its own set of accoutrements, ones that offer only a semblance of social respectability rather than respectability itself: Nell might wield some authority as mistress of an impressive “house with a park,” but as a courtesan, her influence will be limited to her country residence; she might become a mother, but her children by the king will be considered illegitimate by any standard.

Historically, and generally in the dramatic repertory, Nell’s trajectory is given a romantic gloss, a rags-to-riches Cinderella story with an undeniably happy ending. As a result, Nell’s place in history is generally defined by her relationship to King Charles II, which by all accounts was long-term, loving, and successful. Such a perspective, however, devalues her contribution as a theatre professional as well as neglects her unique position as one of the first generation of English actresses. De Angelis’s depiction of Nell challenges this conventional perspective that for the actress sentimentally equates success with romance by interrogating the conditions of theatrical employment for women and troubling the notion of female agency. In this regard, Nell’s retirement from a thriving career is more complicated than it first appears: it is a move away rather than toward something; a decision driven more by fear than by love. In De Angelis’s portrayal, Nell’s ambition, talent, and imagination helped to propel her to unprecedented professional achievements, including shares with the King’s company, a private dressing room at the Duke’s company, and a part written especially for her by Aphra Behn, a new woman playwright who has been inspired by Nell’s example upon the stage.
For a woman, having a room of one’s own is a particular allusion to Virginia Woolf’s 1929 feminist tract *A Room of One’s Own*, which advances the idea that women writers need a literal as well as figurative space to develop and nurture creativity, a separate “room” that exists outside of patriarchal structures that a woman can call her own. Within the play, the symbolic power of such a private room is double-edged, suggestive of both the potential of female liberation and subjugation, similar to the actress/whore trope itself. On the one hand, the dedicated room indicates a degree of status and success for the actress, as well as metaphorically points to the potential for artistic breakthroughs as represented by Nell’s new association Behn, whose introduction as the first woman to write plays signals both the emergence of a new female authorial voice in the theatre and another new profession for women. But the revelation that Nell uses her private dressing room to play hostess to earls and other admiring male patrons troubles any such figurative parallel to Woolf’s feminist artistic haven, serving instead as a reminder of the role of the actress within the erotic and sexual economies of the playhouse. Ultimately, Nell’s rise to become one of the most popular actresses of her day, built on a vision she had of herself as an actress, a young girl’s dream of a better, more creative and personally fulfilling life, falls short of its promise. After achieving a certain level of notoriety and fortune, Nell’s failure to “imagine what comes next” for herself as an actress is not necessarily Nell’s failure alone, but one that reflects society’s failure to empower women economically, socially, politically, and artistically, a reality that significantly limits not only women’s choices but women’s contributions.
Mrs. Marshall gets taken against her will

A popular actress, second only to Mrs. Betterton in seniority, Marshall actively resists the whore label and its concomitant consignment of power to a male keeper. She is the play’s most outwardly feminist character, voicing ideas and ambitions that cut against the grain of current gender ideologies and upset the playhouse status quo. Like Nell, Marshall actively envisions a better future for herself; but unlike Nell’s goal-oriented list of accomplishments Marshall imagines a state of being: “I imagine things, too. “I imagined not having a keeper. Freedom” (51), she says, explicitly expressing a desire for autonomy. Here Marshall establishes that “having a keeper” is standard operating procedure for the playhouse actress, and that the two—having a keeper and freedom—are mutually exclusive. Freedom for Marshall means choice, the choice to define herself on her own terms and not according to her relationships with men. That Marshall need articulate such a dream at all speaks to the cultural and social constraints restricting women’s advancement and opportunities for self-actualization. Deviating from the example of her playhouse colleagues who are only too eager to align themselves with men, Marshall’s journey is characterized by her attempts to extricate herself from male influence and control her own destiny, though the question then becomes whether the actress is allowed to exercise such freedom of choice in the first place.

After the ensemble recovers from Nell’s auspicious show-stopping stage debut in the unnamed pastoral drama, the show must go on. As Betterton expresses her relief that Nell’s impromptu jig has not caused irreparable damage, which would have put her in the
difficult position of having to answer to Mr. Betterton, a still slightly ruffled Marshall prepares for her entrance in the play’s second act:

MRS BETTERON. Well, well, it has not turned out too badly.
MRS MARSHALL. For her. I’m sure I’ve appeared to greater advantage.

(To Doll) Give us a rip. (She takes her handkerchief from around her neck and holds out) I get taken against my will in the second half.
DOLL. Anything to oblige.
MRS MARSHALL. Ta. (25)

The continuation of the pastoral is never staged; this is the last mention of it. But even though we do not see the second half in which Marshall gets taken against her will, this exchange wherein Marshall prepares to be victimized is crucial, for it comically telegraphs the systematic harassment—sexual and otherwise—that characterizes the actresses’ quotidian experience, one that unfortunately does not boast the luxury of preparation or the protection of a staged fiction. Indeed, Marshall’s degradation is not limited to her onstage performance of victimhood, though hers is perhaps not as harrowing a fate as Farley’s. An artful description of the popular dramatic trope of female subjugation, her words “I get taken against my will in the second half” resonate eerily in her ongoing real-life feud with the Earl of Oxford—the result of an affair gone wrong—as well as presage her ostracism in the second half of Playhouse Creatures. Her misfire with Oxford proves to be a costly sexual mistake, one from which there is little opportunity for recovery for the actress. This failed liaison becomes a contest of wills and the bane of Marshall’s existence; it threatens to ruin her career and contributes to her silencing. The Oxford/Marshall episode reifies a sexual double standard, epitomizing how a rigid patriarchy at best limits the freedom of personal choice for women.54
Marshall’s troubles seem to have begun with some unwanted attention from an aristocratic admirer, The Earl of Oxford. A dedicated patron of the theatre, Oxford was in the habit of coming backstage to the tiring room, paying a small fee to watch the actresses prepare before the show, which was how he came to sexually proposition Marshall. “He used to come in here. He paid. To watch us. Changing. . . . Then he wanted to have me” (14), says Marshall, setting the scene for her entanglement with Oxford. Oxford’s behavior here is typical and revealing: his personal interest in Marshall is expressed in sexual terms, betraying a presumption that this is the way the actress is to be experienced. Also, that Oxford paid to watch the actresses change is a historically accurate practice, consistent in many regards with a sexually permissive playhouse culture that objectified its actresses. Whether it was its purpose, such a ritual likely facilitated playhouse affairs, which for many Restoration actresses were a welcomed if necessary part of the job insofar as such relationships could be mutually beneficial arrangements. Men of means generally enjoyed free reign of the premises and they were likely compelled to backstage areas for many reasons, among them curiosity, fashion, and/or the hot pursuit of the actress object of their desire. That professional actresses could not control access to themselves in the backstage tiring room is evidenced by official indictments that tried to ban unwanted visitors and tame uncivil behavior toward the women. However, “[e]ven the King’s proclamations against backstage abuses and ‘disorders in the attiring rooms’ were persistently ignored by the gentleman rakes.”

These edicts perhaps carried little weight because there were no real penalties for disobedience and the aphrodisiac of the actress was just too strong to resist. Further, the
precedent that actresses were sexually available, and that if conditions were right they would bestow personal favors, had already been stipulated by King Charles himself, who certainly set the fashion of keeping actress-courtesans. Once in the playhouse, then, discerning men could attend two shows, enjoying not only the performance of a stage play, but the display of female nudity and *maquillage* backstage in the dressing room that preceded the official production. By their presence, these men—be they gallants or rakes—essentially created a show-within-a-show, carving out an alternate site of performance by turning the goings-on in the women’s tiring room into a type of theatrical event that featured the private lives and bodies of actresses. Such a ritual not only seems to elide any claim to privacy for the actress, but also performs a type of social metacommentary on the conditions of performance itself.

In *Playhouse Creatures* gallants in the women’s tiring room are indeed an ongoing problem and Mrs. Betterton wonders what all the fuss is: “An audience’s place is in the auditorium. Goodness only knows what the attraction is back here” (20). Whether she is being naïve or idealistic, Betterton ignores the obvious bawdy show happening backstage: to her mind the only performance in the playhouse happens on the stage with actors in character playing scenes scripted by the playwright. This view ignores the spectacle of the female body itself, on display at all times, even while not acting in performance. Accordingly, as depicted in the play, theatre patrons are not an uncommon presence backstage, where, “Like flies round—. . . A honey pot” (20), men swarm to witness the unscripted actions of actresses changing their clothes in public, a show of female flesh and real women that furthers the perception of women’s whorish behavior in
the playhouse. Complicating an out of hand condemnation of the practice is the fact that the actresses seem complicit in their own eroticization, since they charge a separate admission fee to their tiring room. At one point, Doll, trying to control the swelling number of eager backstage visitors prior to curtain time, yells at the crowd, “You can wait till after and it’ll cost ya” (20), pointing up that the women themselves likely set how much their changing rituals are worth as an off-the-books performance. But even read from a position of female empowerment, it remains that one of the only avenues for self-promotion open to the actresses is sexual. Regardless of the financial benefit, this type of moonlighting certainly muddies the professional actress waters with an expectation that an actress’s “real” (offstage) time and sexuality can be purchased (and with her consent).

As a regular paying customer to the women’s tiring room, it seems the Earl of Oxford grew tired of mere spectatorship, or perhaps he finally became certain of his choice of actress, and he began to court Marshall’s favor. For her part, Marshall had absolutely no interest in carrying on an affair or in becoming a kept woman in any regard, and declined his proposition. But Oxford would not take no for an answer. And Marshall’s steady refusals did nothing to deter his pursuit. In an attempt to put a stop to this irritating business, the actress approached the earl with what she thought was an outrageous proposition, something that would surely send him packing: she proposed that he could have her sexually, but only if he took her as his wife: “He was a dog. But he persisted. So I said ‘Marry me and I’ll do it’. Thinking he’d go cock his leg up another tree” (14). To her shock, Oxford agreed to the marriage. He arranged for a priest to marry
them in a small country church, and that night Marshall consummated her marriage:

“And we were married by a priest. I thought if he’s fool enough to make me wife I’ll take him for what I can get. So he had his night…And when I woke up the next morning he was gone” (14). As it turns out, the priest who performed the ceremony was an actor hired by Oxford, making the marriage a sham and leaving Marshall publicly disgraced. Her appeal to the king was ineffectual, reinforcing hegemonic cultural norms that dictate earls (men) are beyond reproach and actresses (women) deserve what they get.

This incident is illustrative of the complicated sexual politics of the playhouse where there was an expectation that actresses were sexually available and beholden. Those that then played hard-to-get were in danger of offending with what would be perceived as their arrogance, for the actress/whore is a woman who is not afforded any social or moral cachet. From Oxford’s point of view, Marshall’s humiliation is perhaps a just punishment for the actress who is perceived as a sexual temptress, a woman who teases (both on- and offstage) without granting gratification. In securing his purchase of sex from Marshall by way of such an elaborate ruse, he not only controls the theatrics that usually stop so prematurely at ocular pleasures, but also beats the actress at her own game of deception, undermining romantic expectations by lulling with an illusion of his making that is then forcibly ripped away. As an actor in his own show, Oxford partakes of the undressing instead of just watching it being done. Notably, Marshall arrives to play her part in the (unbeknownst to her) fake wedding ceremony wearing the costume of the doomed Desdemona—wanting to present herself in something appropriate for the occasion, she borrowed from the theatre’s stock. Of course, that Desdemona’s marriage
was ruined by an enemy’s deceitful plotting resonates here. But also of note is that Marshall is not dressed in her own clothes: the earl “marries” the woman but only to have his night with the uncostumed actress, as he desired. Oxford’s plot is a cruel manipulation of emotion that demonstrates his absolute authority over Marshall and punishes her for the insult of her sexual defiance. Perhaps Doll sums it up the best: “Earls, they go to any length. They got time on their hands, see” (14).

Like Farley’s unwanted pregnancy, the Marshall/Oxford episode also highlights how the working lives of actresses are characterized by precarity. In petitioning the king for restitution against Oxford, Marshall ignored Doll’s advice to “[l]ie low” (14). Unfortunately, this has only further antagonized the earl. Despite successfully perpetrating an elaborate fraud that finally gave him sexual access to Marshall, Oxford is still not satisfied. Throughout the play Oxford continues to harass the actress who not only refused his advances but was brazen enough to presume she was fit to be his wife. Exacerbating the situation is her refusal to submit quietly to her punishment; instead, she dared to appeal to a higher authority—or the highest authority—for compensation, though the king took no action. During the curtain call of the company’s final performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Marshall realizes that she is being cursed from the audience by a drunken Oxford:

MRS MARSHALL. (*whispering*) Did you hear that?
MRS FARLEY. (*whispering*) Ignore it?
MRS MARSHALL. (*whispering*) I’m going to say something.
MRS FARLEY. (*whispering*) No!
*Mrs. Marshall harangues an unseen member of the audience*
MRS MARSHALL. Bastard! Poxy prick!
   You are no gentleman!
   Is there no one here who will run him through?
I’ve a mind to see his guts! (11-12)

Unsurprisingly, no one comes to Marshall’s aid, not even the company manager Mr. Betterton who later decrees, through his wife Mrs. Betterton, “that no more is to be said on the matter” (13). In another example of male privilege, rather than the earl’s drunken behavior, the issue at hand becomes the actress’s attempt to defend herself. Her unprofessional onstage outburst here confirms her insubordination as well as further justifies the earl’s antagonism toward her. The incident is an object lesson on playhouse politics that only Doll seems to fully comprehend:

MRS MARSHALL. Whore, he called me.
DOLL. It’s his vengeance.
MRS FARLEY. Vengeance?
MRS MARSHALL. But it’s me that should have the vengeance.
DOLL. Earl.
MRS MARSHALL. What?
DOLL. You often get that sort of behavior off of an Earl, I’ve noticed. It’s just their way. He’ll keep on at you and on at you. Like a wolf at a carcass. He’ll never let up. (13-14)

Doll keenly sums up Marshall’s predicament in one loaded word, “earl,” a word that instantly signifies male privilege, power, and pretention, and, accordingly, the depth and scope of Marshall’s difficulties. Marshall has already referred to Oxford as a “dog,” but here Doll goes further, comparing his relentless aggressiveness to that of a wolf with a kill. Throughout the play, animal imagery emphasizes the male-female hunter-hunted dynamic, the potentially violent nature of male behavior, and the actresses’ position as sporting prey. In this case, Marshall has a point when she protests that it is she, not Oxford, who should be entitled to revenge. But, according to Doll, crude behavior is apparently de rigueur for earls, and Oxford proves to be particularly unscrupulous in his
pursuit of vengeance—“[l]ike a wolf at a carcass” Oxford is fixated on picking clean his fallen prey. Doll warns Marshall about the very real danger of being involved in a feud with such an influential man whose “got time on [his] hands” (14):

DOLL. He could ruin you. Keep coming here, heckling. I seen it before.
MRS MARSHALL. He’ll get bored.
DOLL. Will he?
MRS MARSHALL. I could meet him. Talk, settle it.
DOLL. You got trouble.
MRS MARSHALL. I’ll settle it. (14-15)

Marshall’s determination to “settle it” is an acknowledgment that Oxford’s interference could jeopardize her career and her ability to make a living, as if the phony wedding was not punishment enough. Doll is correct: Marshall’s “got trouble.” Not surprisingly, Marshall’s request for a meeting with Oxford is ignored; and true to form, Oxford proves that he is not likely to soon grow bored with this particular pastime. In an especially nasty incident, the earl sends goons to rough up Marshall: “Outside. Two men. He sent them. Bastards. Thugs. Pulled me out. ‘This is from the Earl of Oxford’, they said. Then they rubbed shit into my hair. To teach me my manners. He sent them” (26). With this physical attack, Oxford exploits Marshall’s powerlessness, making a public spectacle of her debasement. That the assault is supposed to teach the actress her manners suggests that Marshall’s misfortune is self-inflicted, the result of improper or disrespectful behavior toward her social betters, and thus rightly deserved. To presume she had a choice whether to engage in a sexual affair with Oxford is taken as headstrong impudence and the actress’s failure to understand her proper place within a rigid patriarchal structure, one that exacts a punishment if the actress refuses to play the only roles deemed socially acceptable, an onstage deceiver and a offstage whore.
Doll’s reaction to the attack is humorous and poignant: “What did I say? At you and at you like a wolf!” (26), an “I told you so” moment for sure. Frustrated, angry, and deprived of recourse to the law for justice, Marshall resorts to some theatrical sorcery for karmic recompense for her suffering. Appropriating company property, she whittles a small figure of a man from a wax candle. “Homunculus” (31), declares Betterton when Marshall reveals her finished work. Attached to the figurine is a lock of Oxford’s hair, given to Marshall as a token of his love. The sight causes Doll to recoil—“I’m not touching it” (32)—and Betterton to assert “that is evil” (32). Marshall proceeds to puncture the wax idol with straight pins, one through “the bastard’s neck […] for the shit rubbed into my hair,” she cries, and another “for crying whore!” (32). Betterton comments that Marshall’s actions are “witchery!” and that “[h]e will be in pain” (32). Doll corrects her: “He will be in bleedin’ agony” (32). Marshall then casts a spell on her tormentor, borrowing the witches’ incantation from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. “Round about the cauldron go” (32), Marshall begins, inspiring the other actresses, who are all present, to join her. Together they brew the witches’ recipe of eye of newt and howlet’s wing, ending in unison with the chant, “Double double toil and trouble / Fire burn and cauldron bubble.” This frenzy is punctuated by Nell, who “joins in with a demonic version of her jig” (33). “The chant grows to a crescendo as Mrs. Marshall throws the doll to the floor and tramples it underfoot” (33):

MRS MARSHALL. Never prosper! *(She spits on it. She addresses the actresses)* He was my keeper. Now look at him.
MRS FARLEY. You need a keeper.
DOLL. You won’t get another one.
MRS MARSHALL. I don’t want another one. I had a husband once. You
wouldn’t have known me. I used to creep about. He liked me to be quiet.

(33)

In this brief performance, Marshall applies her knowledge as an actress, calling upon all of the resources and elements of her craft to stage her own symbolic emancipation from male domination. It is through performance that Marshall attempts to assert herself and control over her own fate, a foregrounding of the cathartic and transformative potential of performance itself. Her appropriation of the witches’ incantation from *Macbeth* calls upon a female mystical energy that spiritually underscores the power of this theatrical rebirth to effect real change, though the other actresses are deeply troubled that Marshall seems to play at witchcraft here. Still, in a display of creative autonomy, Marshall authors as well as performs her own empowerment. Such a declaration of independence, while extraordinary for any woman, is viewed as an especially reckless and self-destructive move for an actress, which is made plain by Farley’s insistence that Marshall needs a keeper and Doll’s caveat that by opposing the earl she is ruining any chance at attracting another benefactor. Without a male keeper—or worse, having insulted the man who appointed himself her protector—Marshall is in danger of finding her access to a professional career and public persona severely, if not completely, curtailed. In her defense, Marshall says that she refuses to creep about or keep quiet any longer, behavior that was enforced by her former husband. This example of female domestic servitude serves as a reminder of the patriarchal standard predicated on the perception of women’s innate passivity, fragility, and limited faculties. Ironically, it seems as though in this case these qualities were being performed by Marshall to appease her spouse—she played the role of dutiful wife. The notion that
the actress requires the protection of a male keeper is, in part, an extension of this patriarchal paradigm. But the actress who by occupation struts rather than creeps and projects rather than whispers necessarily shakes up gender norms; thus, it is her sexual subjugation—her branding as whore—that regulates her unruliness and reaffirms a disrupted social order in a culturally prescribed manner.

The times, however, they are a-changing, as the song goes, for women and for society as a whole. One measure of progress is represented by Marshall’s news that she has been attending evening salons, gatherings “[i]n some very nice rooms. With interesting people; philosophers, wits, poets” (18). While backstage readying to make their entrances, she tries to explain the salon’s stimulating and intellectual atmosphere and its purpose to Farley:

MRS MARSHALL. You drink coffee and you talk.
MRS FARLEY. Talk? What about?
MRS MARSHALL. Ideas. Thoughts. Discoveries. They now know that the human heart has four separate compartments.
MRS FARLEY. Ugh!
MRS MARSHALL. It’s science. (18-19)

Marshall’s highbrowed salon experience stands in stark contrast to how Farley spent her evening, which was at the palace participating in the humiliation of a beggar woman who, for entertainment’s sake, was pulled off the street and forced to sing in front of the king: “only, she couldn’t sing a note, and I laughed so much I cried” (18), says Farley. Farley expresses her skepticism about Marshall’s role in the salon where the amusement consists only of genteel conversation:

MRS FARLEY. What do they want you there for?
MRS MARSHALL. I’m an actress. They’ve never had one of those before. I’m a novelty. They ask me things.
MRS FARLEY. Ask you things?
MRS MARSHALL. About plays. About me. About life here. How we strut and fret our hour upon the stage. I like it there. It’s the sort of place you can say anything. I’ve said things I never thought I knew I thought. And people listened. (19)

Indeed, the actress is a novelty both on and off the stage, and she offers a never before considered female point of view. In Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere, the salon played a crucial role as a transformative site where the coming together of private persons gave rise to a discourse which introduced critical perspectives on contemporary society, generating a new sphere of public interest that was culturally and politically opposed to court society. With Marshall’s foray into the world of salons, De Angelis foregrounds the changing sociopolitical and cultural terrain as well as highlights female subjectivity within an evolving public discourse. Marshall’s personal journey is instructive. After having been silenced by male authority within the confines of her marriage, Marshall’s profession has helped her to discover and cultivate her voice—literally and figuratively. On the stage she of course lends her voice to the women characters she performs. But it is as part of the salon ensemble where Marshall can “say anything,” expressing curiosity, interest, and opinion. The salon represents an alternative type of public theatre, one of intellectual debate and exchange, emphasizing democracy and encouraging critical examination, where Marshall is an authority on her subject. As an ambassador for her profession, the actress converses on equal footing with “philosophers, wits, poets,” and is actively engaged in shaping public opinion. Speaking from her own experience, Marshall inserts her own subjectivity not only as a woman, but as an actress, a professional female artist and woman pioneer of a traditionally all-male
profession. Through Marshall, De Angelis demonstrates that the actress both contributes
to the diversity of the salon and its cultivation of a broader understanding of
contemporary culture. Further, she establishes the actress and her subjectivity as an
integral part of Habermas’s emerging bourgeois public sphere.

By referencing the bourgeoning coffeehouse subculture, De Angelis creates a
space for socially progressive thought and aligns the actress with the Enlightenment
ideals of individual freedom, scientific inquiry, and philosophical reason, ideals that took
root in the sixteenth century and would promote an increasing trend toward secularization
in the next century. Notably, the second and final mention of the salon comes after the
company’s impromptu hex on Oxford and Marshall’s revelation that she once was
married to a man who preferred she kept quiet, for like the staging of Marshall’s
symbolic emancipation from Oxford the salon is also a performative site of female
empowerment:

MRS MARSHALL. I went out last night. To a salon. Someone remarked
that he’d never known of so much interest in the theatre, not since we
actresses had arrived. Could I corroborate that, he asked? Oh yes, I said.
Certainly. I’ll corroborate it. “You’ll be wanting to own the theatres
next”, he said. “Profits and all”.
Pause (33)

The pause that punctuates Marshall’s story is one of those full, tense moments of stillness
and silence shared among those in the know because a truth has been revealed, yet it is
too dangerous to be acknowledged. The silence is broken only when Marshall flatly
changes the subject back to making plans for the evening: “I’ll have a drink too” (33) she
tells Farley. Following the histrionics of the Oxford exorcism and Marshall’s stunning
report from the salon, the call for alcohol is a comic and not an unreasonable response to
a difficult day. Indeed, Marshall has given voice to a subversive notion: the actresses deserve to become company shareholders alongside the male actors. Despite a hint of chauvinism in his expression, the man from the salon has laid out the economic logic of supply and demand: since, as the main attraction, the actresses have revitalized interest in the theatre, generating increased ticket sales, they have a reasonable claim for financial compensation in the form of profit sharing. Whether the actresses have up to this point considered this possibility themselves is unclear, since an actress-shareholder and this kind of economic enfranchisement is unprecedented for women, it would be difficult to imagine such a reality. But perhaps this anonymous man’s comment was all that was needed to validate secret desires. While this first mention of shares in the play comes at the end of Act I, Act II is all about money: “Shares, shares, they talk nothing but shares. They say you have shares and they will have them too. Company shares and profits” (37). Act II even opens with Nell and Marshall in performance, playing a breeches scene, drawing swords on one another until they realize that they are both women in disguise. They quickly join forces, artfully declaring that, “It is far more profitable to be friends / For us women in a land of men / So let us share our victory / Enjoying our mutual company” (36). To conclude their performance, “They turn to the audience” and together make the following direct appeal for company shares:

And while we’re at it, playing for your pleasure
We’ll ask for shares in your payments for good measure
The price of our glorious forms you see
Is shares in this very company,
They laugh, bow, and exit (36)
The breeches role came into vogue in the Restoration, a theatrical convention that temporarily staged the cross-dressed actress as a man and comically endowed women with male privilege within the confines of the dramatic world of the play.\textsuperscript{58} An important part of the convention was the reveal of the character’s true gender, which playwrights accomplished in a variety of ways, including scripting the opening of bodices to reveal bare breasts, an exploitative trick De Angelis parodies in the Marshall/Betterton Amazon performance. During the sword fight in Nell and Marshall’s breeches scene, the women’s hats fall off, instantly ruining their male disguises and revealing their true female selves, facilitating the requisite righting of the social order as dictated by hegemonic gender ideologies. Although not specified in the script, with the loss of hats we can imagine the escape of long, waving manes of hair, a metonym for female sexuality. In “‘Playhouse Flesh and Blood’: Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress,” Katherine Eisaman Maus write, “[s]urely all the loosened hair, all the naked breasts in the fifth acts are meant to heighten an incongruity of which the audience was already aware; the unmasking reinforces a histrionic appeal which depends upon the seductive appeal of female difference.”\textsuperscript{59} A privileged look at the little seen spectacle of female legs, even the form-fitting tights and breeches costume itself reinforced rather than neutralized female sexuality.\textsuperscript{60} This is reflected in the scene’s dialogue when Marshall’s character comments that not even her opponent’s male disguise could suppress “such noble limbs and lustrous eyes” (36), again pointing up “an incongruity of which the audience was already aware.” Such an incongruity exemplifies Elin Diamond’s notion of the gestic moment, in which a theatrical image drawing potency from its expression of “unresolvable contradictions.”
not only “explains the play, but it also exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production.”

61 Diamond explains how “[a] female performer in breeches, sword in hand, points both to gender slippage and to gender constraint; to a space of pleasurable female activity and to a viewing apparatus that reifies and exploits her sexuality.”

62 Accordingly, the breeches role, operating on the binary of sexual difference, both liberated the actress as well as reinscribed her social othering and sexual objectification by reminding audiences of what women are not.

Notably, De Angelis uses the breeches scene with all of its inherent contradictions as ideological cover for the actresses’ public petition for company shares. By doing so she highlights how such a theatrical convention permitted certain freedoms of expression—Diamond’s “pleasurable female activity”—while still aligning with conservative ideologies that prescribed and staged gender difference in a hierarchical and sexually exploitative manner. Only dressed as men do the actresses have the authority (temporarily borrowed as it is) to address the public with such a radical business proposition, a proposition that intentionally eclipses the fiction of the breeches scene (as staged as a performance within the fiction of the play) in an attempt to effect real change—financial enfranchisement for the actresses. On the one hand, this can be read as another example of the transgressive and potentially transformative power of performance; the theatrical cross-dressing itself a crucial part of the rhetorical strategy championing women’s equality. Yet while the male disguises seem to facilitate a demonstration of women’s abilities, it would be a mistake to take this as a flat out endorsement of gender parity because any socially progressive message is also
understood as safely framed by the comic incongruities inherent to this performance tradition, incongruities designed to reinforce for the Restoration audience the essential identity of the female performer rather than to debate the issue of gender disparity itself. As Jacky Bratton has argued, “[t]his version of ‘cross-dressing’ is scarcely more or less than a display of the female body, and as time went on a performance tradition developed that executed this ‘impersonation’ in an increasingly inflated, exaggerated and overt manner in no way intended to confuse reception of the sexual identity of the performer.”63

But in terms of Playhouse Creatures, the breeches scene, like all of the metadrama dotted throughout the play, is doubly significant because it contributes to the play’s interrogation of theatre and gender that positions the professional actress as a metatheatrical yardstick against which to measure women’s status, past, present, and future. As part of De Angelis’s strategic “consolidation of female voice,”64 certainly the dialogue of the breeches scene promotes a feminist political agenda that further underscores the double-consciousness of the playwright’s self-reflexive approach to her historical subject. In this context, such a commentary not only reflects the lives of the historical actresses being staged but also critically foregrounds the relationship of the real actresses in performance to the history they are actively recreating, as if to say—turning on its head an author’s standard disclaimer—“any resemblance to real people or events is purely intentional.”

As has already been discussed in the above section examining Nell Gwyn, Nell and Marshall do become company shareholders with the King’s company. The scene in
which Marshall breaks the good news (Act II, scene 5) immediately follows Farley’s final appearance in the play depicting her desperate straits since being fired from the playhouse for pregnancy. From the window of their tiring room Nell and Doll can see an exhausted and grimy Farley soliciting on the street below; Doll calls it “[f]eeding off the leavings” (49). Farley’s destitution does not merely provide a counterpoint to Marshall’s announcement of the actresses’ newly won financial partnership, it haunts the celebration—a reminder of how each woman is only one misstep away from calamity. Farley’s situation underscores the point Marshall tries to make to Nell, which is that it is dangerous and foolish to rely on a man for financial security; moreover, now it is also unnecessary, since their elevation to shareholder will provide greater security to make their own living. Worth repeating here is Marshall’s earlier condemnation, prompted by Farley’s predicament, of women’s financial dependency—willing or not—on male providers at the expense of fostering self-sufficiency. Referring to the expensive gift that once symbolized Farley’s professional success and then became the actress’s only sellable asset besides her body, Marshall’s comment “[a] petticoat never saved anyone” (44) expresses pity as well as disdain for what she considers to be Farley’s imprudent and reckless approach to her career, expressed by her promiscuity. Nonetheless, despite the wonderful news and much to her chagrin, Marshall is unable to convince Nell to consider giving up her rendezvous with the king and strike out on her own.

Whereas Nell and Marshall’s breeches scene depicted a natural sisterhood between women resulting in a joint appeal for company shares, female solidarity is not assured beyond the stage performance; even the actresses’ shared victory—the actual
awarding of the sought after shares—fails to engender the type of sisterhood Marshall seeks. Perhaps as befits her youth, Nell gives a very simple reason why she is unwilling to cancel her date at the palace: “Going there. It’s exciting” (51). The balance of Nell’s explanation (which is quoted above in its entirety) reveals an outlook at odds with Marshall’s:

NELL. I have this thing I do. I imagine. I imagine what I want and then I get it. Somehow I get it. It just seems to go on and on and on. And I became an actress and I got the King.
MRS MARSHALL. I imagine things, too. I imagined not having a keeper. Freedom.
NELL. And you got it. We’re different, that’s all. I’m free to do what I want and you are too. (51)

There is an implied correlation between becoming and actress and “getting” the king. Suffice it to say, Nell seems to equate a measure of professional success with the king’s personal attention, which is reason enough for her reluctance to put the relationship at risk. Moreover, she is unconcerned whether this choice in any way compromises her integrity. Marshall’s response to Nell’s contention that they have both succeeded in their own ways is especially illuminating and demonstrates a heretofore unarticulated understanding of the representational machinations of the theatrical apparatus itself:

MRS MARSHALL. Free. To play a faithful wife or an unfaithful wife. A whore, a mistress. We play at being what we are. Where’s the freedom in that?
NELL. How d’you mean?
MRS MARSHALL. But now I’m none of those things, so what am I? (51)

Nell seems impervious to Marshall’s skepticism questioning the quality of the freedom afforded the actresses. While Nell deflects any possible criticism by championing difference (she and Marshall are different people who are free to desire different things),
Marshall is more concerned with the bigger picture, that is, the general condition of women and their shared fortunes. Marshall’s objection to the types of stage roles allotted women is a recognition as well as critique of the inherent limits of women’s freedom of choice, limits ultimately imposed and maintained by the male masters of the theatre not to mention the male keepers of the culture. In this regard, Marshall understands what Nell does not—that she has not won her freedom at all, only the semblance of choice within an already rigged system; as such, the stage provides little respite for the actresses from the roles thrust upon them in real life—a faithful wife, an unfaithful wife, a whore, a mistress. This correspondence between real and staged identities also troubles the notion of female mimesis itself, harkening back to the prejudice that women need only “be” what they are. According to this bias female performance requires no skill or mastery of craft; nor, as Marshall points out, does it afford the actress any real cultural or creative freedom. Notably, Marshall answers Nell’s question by posing one of her own that rhetorically highlights the existential crisis left by the absence of female autonomy: “But now I’m none of those things, so what am I?” (51). Throughout, this exchange demonstrates Marshall’s developing self-awareness of the many ways in which she is bound, personally and professionally, to these culturally entrenched constructions of femininity. However, she is no longer content to acquiesce to expectation, and in the face of adversity she seizes upon opportunity, remarking, “Now we’ve got the chance to be something different, new. Do you see?” (51), once more attempting to recruit Nell to her cause. Here Marshall is eager to lead by example—to promote a feminist consciousness
by forging new paths and futures for women, and helping secure for herself and others the freedom she has always imagined.

But this moment of victory and possibility is short-lived, usurped by a former adversary with a grudge. Of course it is Doll who lets slip the news that dampens the celebration, almost relishing the chance to knock Marshall down a peg. After Marshall optimistically declares the chance to be something new, Doll unexpectedly butts in with an ominous warning: “She ain’t got no chances to be nothing” (51). Nell tries to dismiss Doll’s backtalk as the ranting of an inebriated old woman, but Doll has important information and will not be deterred. “Someone has spoken out of turn,” she explains. “Said something. Betrayed you. . . . He knows about the little wax man. The witchery” (51). As it turns out, coincidentally, the Earl of Oxford has recently had a very bad bout of luck with his health, which has been traced back to Marshall’s performance with the wax effigy: “He had a bad back and three teeth pulled,” reports Marshall. “Also a lump on his neck. Fuck knows the state of his bollocks” (52). The actresses consider the ramifications of Oxford accusing Marshall of witchcraft: “They’re still up to burning people,” says Doll. “Not a pleasant way to go” (52). While Nell believes that this would never come to pass, Marshall realizes it is too much of a risk to take, especially since the vengeful Oxford would likely not intervene on her behalf should the worst befall. She knows that for her own protection she must leave: “I’ll have to live in some bloody cold place. Hidden. Quiet. Keeping my mouth shut” (52). Nell tries to offer some comfort:

NELL. Maybe you could start again, someplace.
MRS MARSHALL. Maybe. They found another word for me.
DOLL. Witch.
MRS MARSHALL. Before I could find one for myself. If they don’t get
you one way they get you another. (52)

With the charge that Marshall is a powerful witch, Oxford not only gets the final word, he gets to paint himself as the victim, once again exerting his considerable influence to publically convict his former lover of feminine transgression. Whereas the actress/whore binary, advanced on the public persona of the female professional, necessarily normalizes a certain degree of nonconformity, the branding of witch remains beyond the pale, a cultural taboo that incites public panic and precludes the possibility of professional legitimacy. An offense punishable by death, there is no reasonable defense against such an accusation based in superstition and coincidence. Accordingly, the situation is such that Marshall has no real choice in the matter but to abandon her career and withdraw completely from professional life—she is essentially silenced and forced into hiding, a reprisal of her enforced subservience and domesticity in the role of wife. The charge is especially devastating coming as it does on the heels of her promotion to shareholder, so that even at the height of her career she is easily rendered powerless. Oxford’s allegation of witchcraft is such an effective weapon against Marshall because it resonates beyond a mere personal affront. The label of witch implies that there exists an inexplicable and ungovernable female power, and that certain women pose a general threat and must be contained.

Even while affording degrees of financial independence and public distinction, the actresses’ profession strictly prescribed both the social sphere within which they were allowed to operate and the manner in which they could participate. As the lively Marshall/Oxford episode illustrates, when an actress aspires to transcend these narrow
confines she is punished for her ambitious presumption. Marshall rejects the role of whore, only to have it forced upon her, for this is the only way the patriarchy legitimizes the actress’s participation in Oxford’s aristocratic circle as well as neutralizes any design on lasting social advancement. Marshall’s defiance is more than just a refusal to play courtesan to Oxford, but a complete repudiation of the actress as kept woman, a lifestyle espoused and embraced by actresses like Farley who view it as their best chance at achieving financial and social security. Despite her feminist stand, Marshall is ultimately denied her independence and the freedom of choice “to be something different, new.” While the space to create this something new briefly presents itself with the actresses’ breakthrough to elite shareholder status, a professional achievement that certainly presents a challenge to entrenched constructs of gender, the void is quickly filled by the cultural and ideological status quo as enforced by male power structures designed to reify female otherness and disenfranchisement. In this case, before Marshall can react to her new circumstances and reach for something “new” she is again taken against her will, ostracized as a threat and menace to society.

Mrs. Betterton: Six widows

While Farley, Nell, and Marshall spend much of their free time socializing and chasing and being chased by men, Betterton’s offstage hours are dedicated to rehearsing, giving lessons, and otherwise taking care of company business, usually with Doll by her side. Betterton’s distinguished career in the theatre has humble beginnings that reflect the
tradition and importance of women’s labor to theatre production, even though women
were not being employed to perform in the plays themselves:

MRS BETTERTON. I used to work in the wardrobe. And I used to watch
and wonder what it would be like. You know, to…
NELL. What?
DOLL. Do it. The acting. (46)

Betterton goes on to explain how she used to help her husband, Thomas Betterton, learn
his lines, and how in the process she would also naturally learn the parts. This sets up De
Angelis’s own imaginative twist on the actress origin story that, like Orkow’s play The
First Actress, challenges the conventional notion that a woman never acted on the stage
previous to Charles II’s royal decree. Mrs. Betterton explains how one day, when the
actor playing Iago opposite her husband’s Othello fell ill, Mr. Betterton allowed his wife
to perform the part, a risky but more agreeable option to canceling the performance
altogether. Of course, her presence on the stage had to be kept a secret so not to provoke
religious authorities who disapproved of theatre in general and of players in particular, to
say nothing of women publically engaging in such unfeminine behavior: “We knew it
could mean trouble if the bishops found me out, being a woman, but we were younger
and reckless and we thought no one would ever know” (47). The couple “got away with
it” (47) and, as they say in the business, Mrs. Betterton was bitten. The experience of
“doing it”—the acting—was liberating and transformative. She had found her calling,
and there was no going back. There is a hint of the sublime in her description of her first
time: “We were very close, Mr. Betterton and I, and it was as if I hung off his breath, and
he off mine, and the words flew between us. That was my first time” (47). This
successful turn began their stage partnership, although her identity as an actress could not be made public until the day the king officially brought the actress into being:

MRS BETTERTON. After that we did it on a regular basis. My fool to his Lear, his Falstaff to my Hal. And then, of course, the day came when everything changed and for the first time we women were permitted by Royal decree to act upon a stage. A great stir it caused. And I was one of the first ever and when I spoke, a great hush descended on the house, and it was as if the men and women gathered there were watching a miracle, like water turning to wine or a sick man coming to health. (47)

While a woman taking the stage was certainly a novel spectacle, Mrs. Betterton’s origin story specifically emphasizes the effect her voice and speech had on her auditors, a reminder that the actress was not only a new presence on the stage but also a newcomer to public oration.

Betterton’s acting prowess helped break down preconceptions of women’s limited abilities. In addition to being one of the first actresses, she had the unique experience of being a female actor, a counterpart to the tradition of male actresses, but one whose true identity had to be kept secret from audience and likely—except for Mr. Betterton—from fellow actors; that is, in order to keep up the deceit on the stage she likely had to pose as a male stage player in real life. Such a ruse gave her not only access to the profession well before the royal decree legitimizing women actresses, but to male roles. Her experience of playing men opposite her husband offers insight into the representation of gender on the stage:

MRS BETTERTON. It was then I knew that I had done a terrible thing and that nothing would ever be the same for me again. I had tasted a forbidden fruit and its poisons had sunk deep into my soul. You see, Iago is like a whip that drives the life around him, when Hal makes a choice the whole world holds its breath. I never forgot that feeling. The poison’s still in my blood. Like a longing. A longing. I looked for that
poison everywhere and couldn’t find it. Not in the Desdemonas or Ophelias. Only in her, the dark woman. (47)

An interloper of an exclusive order, Betterton poetically describes how performance nourished and empowered her, how the male characters she played in secret connected her to humanity and the world, and how she has since been searching for female characters that offer the same sense of satisfaction. Betterton’s use of a forbidden fruit as a metaphor for stage acting invokes a biblical narrative with a twist. Just like Eve is blamed for corrupting Adam, the Restoration actresses have been painted as temptresses who contaminated a pure system and generally lowered the moral tone of the profession. But here the forbidden fruit represents an enlightened experience in which men are already partaking, one that purposely excludes and keeps women ignorant.

Betterton’s story sounds like the confession of an addict who has long been denied her drug of choice. That Betterton’s “poison” is found more readily in the playing of male parts speaks again to the gender constraints that dictate representation—a case of art imitating life. By naming Desdemona and Ophelia, Betterton criticizes a dramatic tradition where female characters function as little more than pawns in male-driven plots of intrigue, revenge, and jealousy. By comparison, male characters she names are instigators, doing the choosing and the acting rather than being passively chosen and acted upon, a much more interesting proposition for any player of parts. While they captivate by their influence and authority—“when Hal makes a choice the whole world holds its breath”—women characters are generally not endowed with the same quality of agency and power, and so they offer less challenge and satisfaction for Betterton. Ironically, the royal sanctioning of actresses, the innovation that revolutionized the
theatre and allowed Betterton to come out of hiding, also ended up limited Betterton’s choices, for as an actress she was now denied her brand of poison, limited to playing less dynamic female characters. For Betterton, only Lady Macbeth—“the dark woman” as she calls her—comes close to providing the stage with a female character of comparable richness and psychological complexity, for Lady Macbeth is a partner in her husband’s political life, though some modern critics would argue she overshadows her husband as an authority figure. While De Angelis uses Shakespeare’s plays and characters as cultural touchstones, lending historical weight to her metatheatrical fiction, the tragedy Macbeth is a motif used to underscore the play’s complicated gender politics that pivot on questions of female agency. Further, that the character of Lady Macbeth represents the high spot in Betterton’s acting career sets up an alternative model to the conventional characterizations of women that populate the dramatic repertory.

Judith Milhous writes that Lady Macbeth became Mary Betterton’s “most enduring role” and De Angelis leverages this fact throughout Playhouse Creatures, using the character to illuminate Betterton’s talent as well as her personal demons. Although Macbeth is not one of the plays staged by the company, the Scottish queen is never far from Betterton’s thoughts. She also takes every opportunity to perform the part, filling moments of emptiness and quiet in the theatre with the dark woman’s words. For example, Betterton, attended by Doll, takes the stage before a performance “moves c and begins to declaim in the grand old way. She is quite terrifying” (15) as she, without warning, launches into Lady Macbeth’s “I have given suck” speech, chilling Doll who exclaims “Lord!” (15). Betterton proudly recalls the effect she can produce on her
auditors: “A fellow began to shake. He was in the front row there. He shook from head to foot and crossed himself” (15). “It’s the way your eyes burn” (15), offers Doll, a critique of the performance that reminds us that character is communicated by more than just the voice. Betterton, a great technician, concurs: “Eyes are the window to the soul. A lot of it’s in the eyes. Mr. Betterton swears by them” (15). Like a musician would tune her instrument, Betterton calls upon Lady Macbeth to keep her skills sharp, returning to her several times throughout the play. But Betterton’s preoccupation with Lady Macbeth, especially her madness, is a personal as well as professional concern. When Betterton recalls a troubling comment her husband made about their getting older, she quickly reaches for Lady Macbeth, not necessarily as an escape but as a way of gaining perspective on her own predicament:

MRS BETTERTON. (She bring out a candle) This is the most wonderful scene. The queen has become a child. She sings rhymes. “The Thane of Fife had a wife…” Why did she go mad, Doll?
DOLL. She killed a couple of geezers. It done her head in.
MRS BETTERTON. Could be. Could be. (28)

The question of Lady Macbeth’s madness casts a long shadow over Betterton, who is less than satisfied with Doll’s facile character analysis. Betterton has been entertaining dark thoughts of her own: “Sometimes I wonder what would happen to a person if it was taken away. That thing that one gives one’s life blood for” (16). She imagines it would be “terrible, terrible” (16). Later in the play we learn that Betterton has taken up spinning yarn by hand, twisting together three different colored yarns to create one tri-colored thread. It is a hobby that occupies her nervous energy and busies her hands for hours; and it is the passage of time that is the object here. She carries around
the work-in-progress, suddenly revealing it for the first time to Doll: “It’s horrible.
What’s it for?” “I don’t know,” replies Betterton. “It’s just a long thing. However, it
keeps weary hands occupied during long plays when one’s appearance is minor” (38).
Like the “long thing” she has created with care but serves no immediate useful purpose,
Betterton’s distinguished career trails behind her, a thing of passing curiosity that points
to past accomplishments rather than future prospects. She has arrived at a professional
crossroads, and forced to imagine the terribleness of the loss of one’s purpose, she finds
herself relating to Lady Macbeth’s mental distress and evaluating her own emotional
well-being. Betterton confesses to Doll that she occasionally hears voices, and it is
difficult to know whether this is a symptom of the disease or part of its cure. In the past
Betterton explains that the voices have whispered comforting truths; however, their
current refrain of “The waiting will not be for much longer” (38) remains ambiguous,
although Betterton chooses to be consoled by the possibility of an approaching, if ill-
defined, happy denouement.

Betterton is not the only one who misses Lady Macbeth. “When are we doing the
queen again?” asks Doll, “The Scottish one” (28). Her inquiry comes after she conducts
an innocent but revealing inventory of the number of widows Betterton’s has recently
played. The latest is Widow Welfed, “a small part with quite a lot of belching” (27) that
Doll is helping Betterton rehearse. While Doll thinks the widow’s behavior seems
improbable—that she would never stoop to entertain the unappealing Squire
Squeamish—Betterton, always the consummate professional, reminds her that “It is the
task of the actress to discover the motivation latent in every role” (27). The part of Widow Welfed, however, represents an alarming trend in Betterton’s career:

DOLL. This is our seventh. I been counting.
MRS BETTERTON. Seventh?
DOLL. Widow.
MRS BETTERTON. You’ve no business, counting. Did you have permission to count?
DOLL. No. Ma’am.
MRS BETTERTON. No. 
Pause
In any case it’s six. Six widows.
DOLL. Seven, if you count the feeble-brained spinster.
MRS BETTERTON. Well, I am not counting her. She is an altogether different question. (27-28)

As the comic and terse exchange makes plain, Betterton does not have to be reminded of the number of widows that make up her career of late. She is well aware of the statistic and none too pleased that Doll has confronted her with such an unappealing reality. A gluttonous and belching Widow Welfed is a far cry from the Iagos, Hals, and Lady Macbeths that she cut her teeth on, another measure of how the dramatic repertory fails the actress, particularly a woman of advancing years. Despite a grim reality, she gamely maintains her faith that her patience will be rewarded; in fact, she believes that this is what the voices are trying to tell her. Attempting to validate secret longings, she describes the phenomenon to Doll:

MRS BETTERTON. Doll? Do you ever hear things? Voices?
DOLL. What sort of voices?
MRS BETTERTON. Ethereal voices. They have told me “The waiting will not be for much longer.”
DOLL. What waiting?
MRS BETTERTON. For a part. A great part. That must be their meaning.
DOLL. How do you know they’re telling the truth? Voices can be tricky.
MRS BETTERTON. Why should they lie? (38-39)
Ever the cynic or perhaps it would be more accurate to say realist, Doll’s distrust of the voices turns out to be prescient, because, though the voices speak the truth, the riddle does not resolve itself to Betterton’s advantage. The voices, it would seem, are actually anticipating the end of Betterton’s career.

Betterton’s first appearance in *Playhouse Creatures* shows her not just at work but working, acting the part of an Amazon warrior in a scene replete with shooting arrows and bare breasts. She follows up her performance as a defeated Amazon with a turn as Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. In this performance, we can easily imagine the spectacle of the queen’s suicide to include Betterton applying the poisonous asp to her (once again) bared breast. From here her professional appearances do not seem to keep pace with her prodigious talents and exceptional reputation. Next she appears in a pastoral as part of a trio of muses called upon to aid the suffering of a suicidal maiden. In Act II the actresses rehearse John Vanbrugh’s comedy *The Provoked Wife*, where Betterton plays Cornet, the very minimal part of a lady’s maid. Though De Angelis lifts this scene from Vanbrugh (I.ii.), she also adapts it, ending the scene with the entrance of an invented character, the chanteuse Pipe, played by Farley who, despite her corset, is visibly pregnant. This dress rehearsal marks the last “performance” for both Betterton and Farley: Farley is fired for indecency because she is “showing”; and in the next scene Betterton announces her retirement: “From today I shall not be attending the theatre on a regular basis. . . . Mr. Betterton has talked to me” (46). Indeed, for Betterton the waiting has come to an end, but not as she imagined. She tries to maintain her composure while explaining the situation:
MRS BETTERTON. Some younger actresses must be given a chance. People like to see them.

DO. Gawd.

MRS BETTERTON. They will partner Mr. Betterton. We were partners for many years. Many years. *(She is very still and does not move)* (46)

Here she likely repeats the reasoning we imagine Mr. Betterton used on her to explain the necessity of her retirement: she must make way for younger actresses. Such a sacrifice, however, is not required of Mr. Betterton, who will partner the new generation of ingénues rather than relinquish the stage to give younger actors an opportunity. It would seem that both women, Betterton and Farley, have lost their sexual appeal and consequently their jobs, though for very different reasons. And although the two actresses generally show very little consideration for the other, their fates are in fact linked, an irony that brings De Angelis’s feminist critique into sharper relief.

Throughout *Playhouse Creatures* there is an ongoing dispute over the question of what it is the audience comes to the playhouse and pays to see, a debate that is played out through and solidifies the Betterton/Farley rivalry. The answer to this question seems to determine to what extent the actress can be considered an artist, which of course has implications for the type of woman who makes her living on the stage. Betterton’s notion that the theatre is a calling reinforces the romanticism of pure artistic pursuit indifferent to financial matters, an ideal irreconcilable with the everyday experience of working women of the playhouse. When Farley complains about her meager playhouse salary, Betterton reprimands her: “Pecuniary considerations should hardly concern us” (29), a rational that irks Farley. “Why?” Farley asks, “It’s not as if it’s a part-time occupation. If I’m not performing, I’m learning lines. Two plays a week” (29). Betterton’s idea that
“Artists work for the love of their craft. Artists work for nothing” (29) does not square with Farley’s pragmatism: “You can’t live on a calling. Air’s the only thing that’s free and you can starve on that” (29). Betterton finds Farley’s economic argument beside the point. Her response defends against this debasement of her vocation as well as betrays a disdain for Farley by suggesting that not all actresses are necessarily “real” actresses:

MRS BETTERTON. People come here, high born and low. They come to our theatre to partake in the sublime. To be part of that peculiar something that uplifts and transforms. To see real actors perform.
MRS FARLEY. Real actors? I’m real, aren’t I?
MRS BETTERTON. You! (30)

As the confrontation continues, Farley challenges Betterton’s artistic idealism with an alternate, if discomforting, truth:

MRS FARLEY. They don’t come to see you. They come to see us.
MRS BETTERTON. Us?
DOLL. Don’t take no notice of her.
MRS BETTERTON. Us?
MRS FARLEY. The young ones. With decent legs.
MRS BETTERTON. Legs.
MRS FARLEY. They can’t get enough of it. Of us. They don’t even see you. Not really see. Everyone knows.
MRS BETTERTON. They see me.
Pause
Of course they do. (30)

When Doll steps in to try and lessen the blow Farley has dealt, she defends Betterton’s professionalism: “Mrs. Betterton has come here [to the theatre] every day of her life. Even when it was closed down. She does exercises with her tongue, to make the words better. I seen her. I seen her up all night with lines. I seen her wash her hands a hundred times so she could say it on stage and you’d believe her” (30)—this final example yet another reference to Betterton’s Lady Macbeth. Through Doll, we get a definition of a
real actress as committed, technically proficient, and artistically truthful. But Betterton understands that there are other, less virtuous agendas to contend with:

MRS BETTERTON. It’s all right, Doll. I am aware. I am aware there are those types. The types that come for flesh. But I am dumbstruck for you. Sorry for you.
MRS FARLEY. Sorry for me?
MRS BETTERTON. If you have not had the joy.
MRS FARLEY. I’m going now. There’s a carriage waiting for me. I’ve got a rendez-vous. You’ve probably never had one of those. (30)

This contentious exchange highlights a philosophical difference between Betterton’s view of actresses as performers and Farley’s view of actresses as the performance, a difference of opinion that speaks to the dichotomies of actress and whore, and art and entertainment. At stake is a claim to a respectable professional identity, a struggle for authenticity framed by the debate over the meaning of the word “real” as applied to the actress. For Betterton, the real actress undertakes a spiritual journey and serves a greater goal beyond the self; this is the path to the sublime, to experiencing the joys of transformation, artistic creation, and communion with audience and fellow artists. Of course, Farley takes offense to the suggestion that she is not a real actress, but her response “I’m real, aren’t I?” (30) presents an unexpected challenge to Betterton’s metaphysics, calling attention instead to the corporeal. Farley’s comment seems to conflate the actress with the female self, locating talent in the act of being and the nature of woman, a view which calls to mind the prejudice that actresses are not cultural creators. Supporting this reading is Farley’s insistence that the audience comes to see the theatrical display of young, attractive female flesh, and that the presentation of character or story on the stage goes unnoticed by comparison. In this model, the economy of the
theatre is an erotic one, fueled by the spectacular commodification of the real actress body. Unfortunately, Betterton’s surprise retirement announcement can be taken as an endorsement of this erotic commodification, an unofficial confirmation that commercial concerns have, at least for now, triumphed over artistic ones. As such, it is a temporary victory for Farley and other young actresses with decent legs, and a blow to Betterton and her generation of women who were the first to cross the profession’s gendered divide.

This gender divide is part of the dramaturgical fabric of *Playhouse Creatures* whose all-female cast necessarily commands that attention be paid to the presence and participation of women in theatre, and by extension to the professional pursuits and lives of all women. But despite its all-female cast, De Angelis’s play is not devoid of male characters. Although the men are never seen, they make their presence known through regular demonstrations of their appetites, influence, and authority. In addition to the king and the trickster Oxford, the company manager Mr. Betterton gives form and substance to the generic male presence that pervades the playhouse and impresses upon the actresses. The physical absence of the male leader of the company is conspicuous and arguably reinforces the actresses’ autonomy; however, Mrs. Betterton, as the senior actress and caretaker of the actresses, defers all questions to Mr. Betterton’s judgment and carries out his wishes concerning the management of the company. De Angelis makes a show of Mrs. Betterton’s supplication to this voiceless, faceless authority in Act II, scene 2, when the company matriarch “addresses Mr. Betterton who is unseen in the auditorium” (36) and broaches, once again, the unpleasant subject of company shares and profits for the actresses. As their spokesperson, she argues the actresses’ case: “They say
that the town does not come to see fusty old men in squashed hats declaim Caesar but to see actresses in the flesh, living and breathing, the real creatures” (37). Since he remains unconvinced, Mrs. Betterton makes a more personal appeal to her acting partner and husband, while at the same time performing compliance and wifely obedience:

No! It is not that I am asking. I ask only because I am asked to ask. But still, it would seem unfair to me that the others should have shares and I none. Am I to sit in the tiring room and watch them count out their coin while I knit mittens? Why, I should not like that. Indeed, no. Also, dear, we need a new cupboard for the cheeses especially, and if I have not asked you once for the means I have asked you a thousand times till I am quite worn thin with asking. And if I did have shares I should certainly know how to put the cash to good purpose. Besides, I should also like to venture a few small opinions of my own concerning artistic matters. (37-38)

Mrs. Betterton’s petition addresses some of the gendered prejudices that keep actresses in the role of employee, while keeping the role of shareholder out of reach. Mrs. Betterton specifically defends herself against the accusation that women have no head for money; she insists she would know “how to put the cash to good purpose,” but is fighting the perception that women are extravagant and frivolous and would spend foolishly if left to their own devices. Most revealing is how her entreaty equates a financial stake with a measure of artistic control—she would “like to venture a few small opinions.” And this is perhaps the heart of the matter. To grant actresses company shares is to allow women to have artistic say, a type of enfranchisement and democratization that arguably poses a greater threat to the male establishment than the redistribution of the company’s equity. Mr. Betterton ignores the business issues altogether by fixating on the unreasonableness of the request for funds to purchase a new cheese cupboard. De Angelis comically plays out the gendered argument that puts husband and wife at cross-purposes by giving Mrs.
Betterton the final word and the win: “Indeed, Thomas, you are the one that’s partial to cheese” (38). However, although she scores occasional victories, her forced retirement, announced in the very next scene, requires that she surrender the war. Given that Mr. Betterton has orchestrated his wife’s departure, it appears as though he does in fact understand the box office draw of “actresses in the flesh” but in a way that devalues maturity and experience (as well as perhaps talent). And ironically, the actress who agitated on behalf of the younger generation is ultimately displaced by those same women whose cause she championed.

As the company’s actor-manager, Mr. Betterton’s authority is not to be contradicted. Indeed, Mrs. Betterton reminds the actresses on more than one occasion that Mr. Betterton’s “orders come from higher up. From Mr. Killegrew and beyond him King Charles the Second of England, Ireland, Scotland and the imperial conquests” (12). Humorously, in this instance, Mrs. Betterton uses this blustery invocation of her husband’s endowed authority to convey his wish that the piss pot be emptied on a daily basis. It is an underhanded compliment to be sure, one that uses laughter to bring De Angelis’s metatheatrical feminist critique momentarily back into focus. Because unlike the Amazons who “live[d] without the rule of men” (8), the Restoration actresses of the King’s Company were in fact servants to the king, employed at his pleasure. While we would like to take this fact to mean the actresses enjoyed the protection of the crown, it also leaves open the possibility that the actresses were at the mercy of aristocratic whims and tastes, and could, for instance, find themselves in the power of dangerous predators like the Earl of Oxford without any official recourse. Betterton’s repeated detailing of
company’s male hierarchy is a not too subtle reminder of the patriarchal politics that ruled playhouse and kingdom.

The play’s flashback to the world of the Restoration stage ends with Nell’s dismissal of Mrs. Betterton as her coach followed by the announcement of Nell’s retirement. Nell’s exit leaves Mrs. Betterton and Doll onstage alone. Doll expresses concern that this series of events has taken its toll on the veteran actress: “You’re not hearing them voices again?” (58). Betterton’s answer comes in the form of a recitation, in its entirety, of Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene. The stage directions indicate “She does it wonderfully in the grand old manner”: “Come, come, come, come, what’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed” (58). She concludes the monologue and pauses. Finally, she continues:

MRS BETTERTON. I know why she went mad, Doll. It was the waiting, the waiting.
DOLL. You’ve not gone mad, have you?
She gets up slowly and exits. (58)

This epiphany regarding Lady Macbeth’s madness finally answers the question that has been plaguing the actress throughout the play, but it offers only some consolation, because for Betterton it is accompanied by the realization that her patience and faith have not been rewarded. She believed that the voices, which told her that the waiting would not go on for much longer, were harbingers of better things to come—of a great part—when in actuality they were anticipating her final, unceremonious exit from the stage. Betterton has spent most of her career watching her male colleagues get their choice of psychologically complex characters to play. But the actress has had to content herself
with playing stereotypes of women and characters that presented little creative challenge. A final inventory of Betterton’s parts done upon her departure from the King’s Company comically drives the point home. When she gives Marshall, who has been designated the inheritor of Betterton’s roles, a bag full of scrolls, Doll announces (with some cheek), “Here y’are. Assorted queens and wives. Faithful have a blue star, unfaithful a red circle” (50). That this entire repertory of women characters that comprised Betterton’s career is catalogued using this binary of female fidelity is certainly a sorry reflection of the theatre and its depictions of women. Incidentally, now that she owns them, Marshall decides to burn the scrolls, a last performance of protest before accusations of witchcraft force her underground.

Betterton’s performance of Lady Macbeth serves as her farewell to the theatre and brings down the curtain on this play’s history of the Restoration actresses. It is apropos that the scene Betterton has chosen (Act V, scene 1) is also the last time Lady Macbeth is seen onstage in Shakespeare’s play. A haunted woman, Lady Macbeth can find no peace, not even in sleep. Her dreams bring her back to her misdeeds, and in this her final scene she reflects on the irreversible course of events that have led to this present moment of suffering and distress. This is also a moment of reflection for Betterton that once again foregrounds the transformative power of performance itself, both for the performer and for an audience. It is through the act of performance that Betterton validates and reasserts control over the circumstances and experiences that have shaped her life. Additionally, by calling forth Lady Macbeth the actress creates and shares a moment that both highlights and exceeds the present performance; it is a moment that reminds us why we come to the
theatre, in Betterton’s words “to partake in the sublime” (30). She shows us that while the profession may have abandoned her no one can take away her craft: she is a commanding and talented actress at the height of her power. Shakespeare’s final mention of Lady Macbeth is a report of her death, likely by suicide; but we have no fear that this is Betterton’s fate because the actress’s final exit is marked by a new found wisdom and self-awareness. Betterton may be old and eccentric, defeated even, but she is sane and in control; moreover, she has experienced and been the means through which others have experienced “the joy” (30).

The unwritten epilogue

The final scene of Playhouse Creatures returns us to the netherworld inhabited by the ghosts of Nell and Doll. They are waiting for the epilogue signaling the conclusion of the performance, but it has yet to be written. They chitchat to pass the time. She tells Doll that she had her portrait painted: “I had me picture done. Stark naked. He’d sit and look at it for ages. Just him looking at me. Hours, and the room’d turn dark” (59). Here De Angelis pits the image of the actress against the actress herself. Tellingly, the portrait which turns the actress into a still life upon which anything can be projected or imagined turns out to be stiff competition for the flesh and blood woman for the king’s attention. Reminiscing about her life with the king, Nell looks to Doll for a little reassurance: “Still. I never did nothing I didn’t want to. Did I?” (59) she asks. Doll’s response reveals what Nell has not yet gleaned: “You don’t see nothing. Do ya?” she says. “Playhouse creatures, they called you. And them was the polite ones. Like you was animals.” Nell is
incredulous: “But we spoke and we was the first!” she protests. “And where’d it get you?” (60) asks Doll. This question lingers in the pause that follows this exchange. It is a question that, unfortunately, keeps coming up for women. It is a question that demands the courage of constant reflection and critique. It is a question that bridges the past, present, and future. Nell breaks the silence with an offer to do an epilogue:

NELL. I’m going to do an epilogue. Do it with us? For old times’ sake?
DOLL. I can’t remember no epilogues. My mind’s prone to wander.
NELL. We’ll make one up. Go on, Doll. I’m going to dedicate it to Mrs. Betterton.
DOLL. Mrs. B?
NELL. Yeah.
DOLL. She’d have liked that.
NELL. Yeah. Look around. There’s no-one here, Doll. Just us. Those promises we made. They’re old. Dust. Now we can say what we like.
DOLL. What will we say?
NELL. Anything. Now we can say anything. (60)

After Nell speaks the final words of the play, the stage directions instruct, “They come forward together as if to begin an epilogue. The Lights go down. Curtain” (60). It is an equivocal ending that prevents a clear feminist victory. Instead, De Angelis leaves us with a pregnant pause full of possibility yet tempered by the responsibility that comes with an opportunity to “say anything.” As a type of answer to this challenge, Playhouse Creatures enacts some of the opportunity the play imagines: a woman playwright writes for the actresses of her day, just like Behn picked up her pen to write for Nell. The future, then, lies with partnerships where women create opportunities for other women. In the theatre this means a program of women writing for women and the creation of a new repertory of yet unwritten parts and unplayed performances that foreground women’s history, bodies, and voices.
Endnotes


5 Straub 100, italics in original.

6 Straub 100.

7 Straub 22.


9 Straub 98.

10 Wilson 105.

11 Wilson 105.

12 Jacqueline Pearson notes that Anne Bracegirdle specialized in playing chaste and virtuous heroines, and that while “such roles clearly benefited from the audience’s knowledge of Bracegirdle’s life and character . . . the very few frail or vicious roles she played . . . gained a new and effective shock value by contradicting what the audience thought it knew about the actress.” See *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women and Women Dramatists 1642-1737* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988) 26.

13 This anecdote is included in most histories of the era. For example, see Wilson 105-06 and Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 103.

14 Howe 103.

15 During the Roman Empire the job of female “entertainer” was absolutely meant to be taken in the double sense of the word, so that the world’s oldest and second oldest professions for women—prostitution and acting—have always, to a certain extent, been tied at the hip. Henry Wysham Lanier’s colorful reference to Theodora and the lowly occupation to which she was born underscores his point that the first English actresses found themselves bonded to the theatre:
“these first actresses of the English stage were in much the same position as little Theodora and her sisters of the Constantinople Hippodrome—chattels of the management.” Henry Wysha Lanier, *The First English Actresses from the Initial Appearance of Women on the Stage in 1660 till 1700* (New York: The Players, 1930) 44.


17 Watts Phillips, *Theodora: Actress and Empress* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1866) 52. Phillips’s version concludes with a tableau of Theodora grieving over the dead body her son, whose death she is responsible for, only intimating at her probable execution. While Sardou ends his play with the beheading of Theodora over the body of her dead son.

18 Anne (Nance) Oldfield is also a character in Christopher St. John’s actress pageant *The First Actress*, written only seventeen years after Aldrich’s play. See Chapter 1 for more on St. John’s play.

19 Margaret (Peg) Woffington is a Dublin-born actress who is also a character in Christopher St. John’s *The First Actress*. Woffington lived openly with David Garrick, who became the foremost actor of his day. J. R. Crawford’s *Lovely Peggy: A Play in Three Acts Based on the Love Romance of Margaret Woffington and David Garrick* imagines their intense but tumultuous personal and artistic partnership. See Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography of Actress Plays for a brief synopsis.

20 Actress-manager Laura Keene became known for her portrayal of Peg Woffington in Reade and Taylor’s *Masks and Faces*, a part she performed throughout her career. She produced the play in 1856-57 as part of her first season presented at Laura Keene’s Theatre, a brand new Broadway venue constructed to her specifications.

21 Nell Gwyn is another early Restoration actress who has inspired several plays. I will discuss this in Chapter 3.


23 Baker 169.


25 A twist on this is a 1687 production of *The Rehearsal* where Susannah Mountfort played Bayes. It became the fashion for actresses to be cast in male roles, or to stage all-female productions of popular plays. See Jacqueline Pearson 28-29.

26 This plot has many similarities to the 1998 Hollywood film *Shakespeare in Love*, directed by John Madden and written by Marc Norman and playwright Tom Stoppard. Gwyneth Paltrow plays Viola a young noblewoman who disguises herself as a boy, auditions and wins the
part of Romeo in Shakespeare’s new comedy, which eventually becomes the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. When circumstances force Viola to perform the part of Juliet, lest the show be cancelled, she is exposed as a “woman” during the performance; however, an incognito Queen Elizabeth happens to be in attendance. The queen maintains the ruse for everyone’s sake, forgiving Viola’s indiscretion on the one hand, while at the same time definitively putting an end to her stage career. However, I cannot find any mention of Orkow’s play as a possible source of inspiration for the film.

27 Perhaps another measure of the legitimization of the actress as a field of study is the addition of “The Actress” to the *Cambridge Companions to Literature* series in 2007.


29 Lerner 207.

30 Lerner 117.

31 Jeffrey Hatcher adapted his own play for the 2004 film retitled *Stage Beauty*, starring Billy Crudup as Kynaston and Claire Danes as Maria Hughes. (The film combines the play’s characters of Maria the dresser and Margaret Hughes the first actress.) Also released in 2004 was the film *The Libertine*, screenplay adapted by Stephen Jeffreys from his play, and starring Johnny Depp as Rochester and Samantha Morton as Barry.

32 April De Angelis, *Playhouse Creatures* (London: Samuel French, 1994) 13. All subsequent references from the play are from this publication and will be given as parenthetical citations.

33 Probably due to financial considerations, The Sphinx asked for a play with four women characters. This, however, felt too limiting to De Angelis; so she gambled and created five women characters to tell her story. She was sure that The Sphinx would not refuse her play even if she had sneaked an extra character in. See April De Angelis, in conversation with Michael Oakley, “Fly: Under *Playhouse Creatures*” recorded on 25 July 2012, published on YouTube 27, July 2012, accessed 30 October 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_80zAV5H2A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_80zAV5H2A).

34 In 1997, Dominic Dromgoole asked De Angelis to rewrite *Playhouse Creatures* for a season with Peter Hall’s Company at The Old Vic. For this production she was asked to add male characters, which she did, creating the Earl of Rochester and Ottway, a playwright. She also added one more actress Mrs. Elizabeth Barry to bring the cast to eight. This version includes a take on the Rochester/Barry partnership/romance. The Old Vic version premiered in September 1997 and is published in the collection *April De Angelis: Plays* (London: Faber, 1999) 153-231. In her conversation with Michael Oakley (65n33) there is mention of a third version of the play with six women, and Oakley (with the playwright’s permission) created his own version of the play for his 2012 production for Chichester Festival Theatre by taking the original five woman play and adding bits from the other versions. De Angelis says that the male characters were not very popular. In this dissertation I focus only on the original 1993 script and its all-female cast.
In this period all actresses, whether married or single, were listed with the title “Mrs.” which cultivated some gloss of respectability, as opposed to the title “Miss” which meant “mistress” or kept woman. In her script De Angelis uses the actresses’ professional names with the honorific “Mrs.” in the same manner that the actresses would have been credited in playbills during the Restoration, with the exception of Nell Gwyn, whose character name in *Playhouse Creatures* is simply “Nell.” I will follow this, referring to the actresses by their last names except for Nell Gwyn.

This is the complete character description for Doll Common on the “Characters” page in De Angelis’s script. It is likely that De Angelis borrows this character name from Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*.


Howe 92.

Howe 94.


Carlson 1.


Howe 176.

Howe 39.

April De Angelis, e-mail to the author. 16 March 3013.


Claycomb 539.

Elizabeth Farley eventually changed her professional name to Mrs. Weaver, after James Weaver with whom she lived with for a time. “Mrs. Weaver” was pregnant while employed as an actress with the King’s Company. That the “pregnancy could not be concealed for ever” apparently did cause her dismissal. When the actress protested her termination, a
principle shareholder of the King’s Company fired back, saying she “had been dismissed because she was ‘big with child’ and ‘shamefully so’ since she was not married.” Farley did return to the stage, but continued to have financial difficulties. Her fate is unknown, but if she is the “Mrs. Farley” referenced by Rochester in one of his poems, then she became a prostitute. See Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 431-32.


51 I borrow the phrase “spectacular flirtation” from the title of Gill Perry’s book *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre 1768-1820* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007) which examines how visual imagery of actresses influenced ideas of femininity in the Georgian period.

52 See 22n47.

53 Pearson 31.

54 Aubrey de Vere, twentieth Earl of Oxford became infatuated with Hester Davenport, a well-known actress. According to Antonia Fraser, since Davenport was “the darling of the stage” and enjoyed secure employment, she was able to support herself and “therefore began by refusing Lord Oxford’s tender of protection. . . . Various contemporary accounts agree that Hester Davenport only finally succumbed because Lord Oxford made it seem lawful for her to do so.” Oxford produced a fake signed contract of marriage, staged a fake wedding, and “married” the actress. Another actress, who had been told that Davenport was just playing the part of a bride in a play, served as witness to the nuptials. The next morning Oxford told his bride to “Wake up, Roxalana, it is time for you to go”—after her performance in *The Siege of Rhodes* in 1661, Davenport was widely known as her character name “Roxalana.” Years later Davenport had a son by Oxford. See Fraser pp. 425-26.

55 See Wilson’s chapter “Behind the Scenes” (pp. 22-42) for additional examples of abuses and official edicts.

56 When Sir Hugh Middleton called Rebecca Marshall “a jade,” the actress appealed to the king and was awarded the protection of the crown. However, she made the mistake of boasting about her victory against the courtier whereupon the affronted Middleton employed some ruffians “who flung excrement in her face and hair and ‘fled away’” (Howe 33). Howe concludes, “Society in general appears to have considered the actress fair game.”


58 It is estimated that “between 1660 and 1700 nearly one-third of all new plays written contained ‘breeches’ parts.” See Lesley Ferris in *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 71.

Regarding the titillating sexual spectacle of the actress in breeches Jacky Bratton writes: “as soon as there were actresses on the British public stage they began to wear breeches or trousers to show their legs while dancing, and dramatic roles were very soon written in which they could make a similar display for the sexualized enjoyment of the spectator, and, in some cases, could make fun of male appearance and self-regard in the process.” See “Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 235.


Diamond 72.

Bratton, “Mirroring Men” 236.

Claycomb 539, as previously reference p.78n48.


Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Wife* first performed at Lincoln Inn Fields in 1697 is one of the play’s anachronisms. De Angelis sets *Playhouse Creatures* in “approximately 1670” (iii) and in the play Mrs. Betterton announces the company’s 1669 season of plays, which includes *The Provoked Wife*. In the original 1697 production, Thomas Betterton played John Brute opposite Elizabeth Barry’s Lady Brute. Incidentally, Barry was Thomas Betterton’s junior by 23 years and Mary Betterton’s junior by 21 years. By including *The Provoked Wife*, De Angelis seems to leverage the fact of this original casting to underscore how new roles favored younger actresses, even while age did not seem to adversely affect Thomas Betterton’s career choices.
CHAPTER 3

STAGING CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDES AND RESPECTABILITY

To moderate the threat that actresses, by their very existence, posed to the masculine domination of women, many Victorians adopted a defensive and self-serving rhetoric that was used pervasively throughout the period—even late in the nineteenth century when actresses and actors often sought, and in some cases achieved, an enhanced social standing. This male-configured language reconstructed the performing woman as more than an actress—as a renegade female, one fundamentally different from normative wives and mothers, marginally “feminine” if feminine at all, quite possible inhuman. In thus rhetorically dividing her from other women, their own wives and daughters, Victorian men could permit the actress a limited freedom and a certain power.

-Kerry Powell, *Women in Victorian Theatre*¹

In her 1991 book *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, Tracy C. Davis asks the question, “Why were actresses so equivocal in Victorian society?”² Among other things, the answer hinges on the perception of women’s sexual malfeasance and the seeming actress/whore tautology. As Davis demonstrates, various social and economic factors in the Victorian period led to a surplus of labor, and the theatre was one of the paths of least resistance for women to pursue employment. The Victorian stage proved to be a double-edged sword, presenting the opportunity for financial independence on the one hand—women could and often did make as much as men—but socially ostracizing its female practitioners on the other. Actresses garnered
attention not only because they cultivated public personas but also because of their intrusion into the male-dominated business world. That they were paid for presenting themselves onstage again invited the sexual double meanings of female “entertainer” and “working” woman, the latter which Davis references in the title of her book. Branding the actress a whore not only signaled her (perceived) sexual availability but also that she was an unruly woman who lived beyond the pale. Additionally, during an era that embraced an essentialized femininity, the actress’s ability to convincingly assume various personas made the “real” woman not only difficult to identify but also suspect.

Underscoring the actress’s unique position, Davis points out that no other types of women operating in the public sphere were so sexually stigmatized: “The public nature of acting and the absolute necessity of putting oneself up for general scrutiny led to an intellectual association between actress and prostitute that no other educated public woman moving in society on a pretense of her accomplishments, marriage, or breeding was saddled with.”

It was a question of decorum: “respectable” women did not work outside the home. In doing so, Victorian actresses flagrantly “defied socioeconomic prescriptions about Good Women.” The working actress seemingly rejected domesticity; her pursuit of financial independence, a particularly “unfeminine” trait, was perceived as a threat to male hegemony. This brazen behavior left women open to moralistic condemnation that propagated the notion that an aspiration to financial independence was sexually suspect. This association of actress with prostitute was entrenched in the minds of Victorians. Davis writes:

It was unthinkable to middle-class Victorians that any woman would freely, willingly chose to whore for a living, but it was undeniable that
women did choose to enter the danger zone of artistic freedom and sexual opportunity in the theatre, however forced the decision may have been by economic circumstances and the limitations of alternatives.\(^5\)

A career on the stage, then, was no better for women than a return to the oldest profession, part of a cultural prejudice that maintains a woman’s body is her only currency, her only path to self-determination. Historical ideologies that conceive of woman in terms of the dichotomies of public/private and virgin/whore work against female creativity, fostering the association of actress with whore by reducing the actress’s art to mere spectacle: the licentious display of the female body.

Nineteenth-century ideology pivoted on the idea of a male/female binary. Women were defined in relation to men, and gender was a natural expression of biological sex. In *Dimity Convictions*, Barbara Welter identifies the pillars of what she termed the Cult of True Womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, four “cardinal virtues” that were culturally reinforced by countless periodicals, novels, medical and religious texts, and etiquette manuals as well as through the social institutions of family, church, and school. Welter writes: “The nineteenth century was confident that it knew the differences between the sexes and that these differences were total and innate. Women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men, and were happier doing tasks, learning lessons, and playing games that harmonized with their nature.”\(^6\) Moreover, Victorian biomedical discourse provided an uncontestable scientific (and pseudo-scientific) foundation for the social othering of women. Jill L. Matus points out that even though Victorian prescriptions of social relations based on sexual and gender difference appealed to the scientific community for authority, “science itself
depended on cultural assumptions about gender.” Biologically tasked with True Womanhood, women in the nineteenth century were victims of the complementarity of cultural and scientific discourse and its near pathological scrutiny female identity.

For women, the notion that biology is destiny has deep roots, some of which are easily traced back to antifeminist tracts in Scripture. Christian teachings that stress the “natural” virtues of silence, modesty, and obedience betray a blatant disregard for women’s individuality and independence as summarized by St. Paul’s injunction in Timothy 2:11: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submissiveness. I do not allow any woman to teach or exercise authority over man; she is to remain silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.” Here again, that Eve was the first to be seduced and then herself became a seducer speaks both to female frailty as well as to a feminine power to transform and corrupt, a power essentially demonic in nature. Still, according to St. Paul, salvation is possible for women, achieved if they fulfill their biological role in procreation, but only in the manner prescribed and officially sanctioned, a caveat that overtly equates acceptableness in female sexual behavior with a standard of feminine moral propriety.

Against these sorts of strict prescriptions of femininity and female behavior, which created an idealized domesticated female persona that is commonly referred to as “The Angel in the House,” the acting profession offered the chance at a very different type of life for the nineteenth-century woman, a chance not just to be something different
but to be something at all. Silence and submission were not pillars of the theatre, let alone character traits associated with actresses—unless, of course, the part required it. Kerry Powell in *Women and Victorian Theatre* (1997) describes this fundamental contradiction that put the actress at odds with nineteenth-century gender paradigms: “This reversal of Victorian norms in the theatre, where women could vocalize powerfully while men fell mute, goes a long way toward explaining the fascination that reviewers themselves expressed for the voices of women performers. The speech of actresses beguiled them into a passivity that could be likened to the effects of witchcraft or narcotics.”

Mere vocalization endowed the actress with an almost supernatural power to dominate her audience, seemingly apart from any meaning the words she spoke communicated. Powell’s many examples of reviews that comment on the actress’s voice remind us that even if the theatre is a “seeing place” first, it is also the “hearing place” of the auditorium, and the audience participation requires both spectatorship and auditorship. Sarah Bernhardt’s voice was “exquisitely toned” and produced a “ting[ling] on one’s spinal cord.” Ellen Terry’s voice “melted your bosom.” And Miriam Rooth’s voice was “the richest sound to be heard on earth.” Indeed, the actress’s power was twofold. And no doubt she was well aware that she was a spectacular as well as auditory delight. The latter especially separated the actress from her Victorian sisters. Powell sums up:

The actress’s exhilaration at the sound of her own voice, and its powerful effect upon others, is easily understood. Unlike most Victorian women, who were told in advice literature to “suffer and be still,” actresses were allowed the power of speech and often exercised it with results that could be measured by the profound silence of a crowded auditorium.
Although George Du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* was not published until 1894, Victorian discourses that understood an actress’s ability to wield power over her audience as a near supernatural one seems to position her as a type of Svengali, anticipating Du Maurier’s iconic hypnotist and domitor of women’s minds and creativity. (The novel was adapted for the New York stage by Paul Potter in 1895.) Like Svengali, the actress spellbinds, manipulates, and renders her audience helplessly passive. For example, Ellen Terry was regarded as the greatest actress of the day in part because of the “ideal” and “mystical” qualities of her performances, which, as characterized by Powell, “situated the actress on the margins of humanity—she became a delicate flower or a ‘mystical’ force, or, in the worlds of another of her admirers, a ‘spiritual essence’ more than a woman.”

Nina Auerbach’s book *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982) is dedicated to uncovering and understanding the “most powerful, if least acknowledged, creation” of the Victorian cultural imagination, the “magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restrict her.” Defining the demon in the woman as “that disruptive spiritual energy which also engorges the divine,” Auerbach writes: “This demon is first of all the woman’s familiar, the source of her ambiguous holiness, but it is also the popular—and demonic—imagination that endowed her with this holiness in defiance of three cherished Victorian institutions: the family, the patriarchal state, and God the Father.” Auerbach interrogates the power of literary character types, arguing that the rigidity imposed by these categories “concentrates itself into a myth of transfiguration that glorified the women it seemed to suppress.” Furthermore, this diverse, indestructible, and eternal literary landscape highlights
“woman’s power of self-transformation” and “her home in the mermaid’s realm of magic and infinite change” rather than under her father or husband’s roof. From a perspective of female empowerment, then, the literary myth of transfiguration can be read as reflecting a feminine power of social and cultural adaptation. For Auerbach, it is a myth that positions woman at the heart of the Victorian preoccupation with the idea of character itself: woman’s “grand incarnation in character types enables her to incarnate character itself, the nineteenth century’s most potent vision of humanity made perpetual.”15 This power to incarnate character, in the multiple meanings of the word, is magnified and made material on the stage. Performance not only enacts this power of transfiguration but locates its source in the actress herself. “By virtue of her public identity, her self-transforming power, and her association with myths of fallen women and with literary character,” says Auerbach, “the actress unleashes divine-demonic womanhood.”16 From here then, it is easy to see the necessity of Du Maurier’s invention of Svengali, a creature equal to the task of taming and neutralizing the literary and embodied power of the actress to transform herself as well as her audience. A menacing figure with questionable motives, Svengali is endowed with the power to hypnotize and render his women victims passively active. While under his influence the female performer is completely at the mercy of Svengali’s manipulations, placing the power of female creativity and performance safely under a man’s control.

The construction of actresses as carriers of “divine-demonic womanhood” certainly contributed to an understanding of actresses as socially equivocal; as creatures of extreme excess; as both more and less than human. Indeed, such a portrait of actress
helped “to moderate the threat that actresses, by their very existence, posed to the masculine domination of women.” Moreover, the nineteenth-century actress was still very much bound by the sigma of whore, a woman who was also characterized in dehumanizing terms, for as Nickie Roberts writes in *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society* (1992) “the whore had no intelligence—she was only flesh, wild impulses, animal passions and instincts.” United by an “unnatural” nature, the distinction between actress and whore was not necessarily an important one:

As late as 1896 the *Theatre* was lamenting the popular identification of real-life prostitutes with actresses, including the fact that many women of the street were identified as actresses in newspaper reports, although “the so-called ‘actress’ has no theatre except for the thoroughfare and no stage but the pavement . . . The word “actress” was, in other words, a euphemism for “prostitute” in the press, where the meanings of the two words were at times indistinguishable.”

Even so, despite the obstacles, women did succeed in the theatre, and most joined the profession by choice. And while some actress-daughters were disinherited by their families, others were whole-heartedly supported, their public personas bolstered by respectable family connections and social status. As Sandra Richards points out, family was a stabilizing and rehabilitative force in the theatre, from which women benefitted greatly: “The flourishing of theatrical dynasties throughout the century paved the way to respectability for the actress by making possible, for the first time, a family life as stable as any that could be found in the middle classes outside the profession.”

When staging the actress, then, the whore trope allows for an understanding of the woman who willfully trades upon her person for her living: from one standpoint, this woman is no better than the streetwalker who sells sex for money; however, if she has the
moral fortitude to withstand the temptations of such a coarse profession, she is celebrated for her scruples and honorable conduct. Here, the angel of the theatre not only rises above the shame associated with the acting profession, her participation rehabilitates her profession; she succeeds as a woman in spite of being an actress, and redeems the actress in the process. Where the angel succeeds, the whore fails, and she fails in a way that fulfills expectations and reinforces the licentiousness and depravity of her chosen profession.

Although not as prolific as actress-novels, actress-plays seem to come into fashion in the nineteenth century. While I am not yet able to definitively pinpoint the first actress-play on the London stage (though a contender for this title would be Buckingham’s *The Rehearsal* from 1673), the early nineteenth century seems to mark a true coming of age for the actress character. Edward Jerningham’s *The Peckham Frolic; or, Nell Gwyn* published in 1799 is not only an early example of this emerging genre but marks the start of the upcoming century’s fascination with staging the Restoration actress Nell Gwyn. Thomas Horton’s *Nell Gwynne; The City of the Wye; or, The Red Lands of Herefordshire* was published in 1928. In 1933 John Walker’s *Nell Gwynne; An Historical Drama* and Douglas Jerrold’s *Nell Gwynne; or, The Prologue* were produced and published. Tom Taylor and Charles Reade put Nell Gwyn in their 1854 play *The King’s Rival*. And George C. Hazelton’s *Mistress Nell* appears in 1900. Another notable but later work is Paul Kester’s *Sweet Nell of Old Drury Lane* (1928).

Part of the dramatic formula involving the actress character concerns her rehabilitation, or at least the notion that she requires rehabilitation, a narrative that
pervaded nineteenth-century society and its dramatic repertory. The sentiment here is the whore must be saved: redeem the whore, turn bad girl into good, and release the true and angelic potential of the woman who is the actress. In one regard Nell Gwyn is the perfect poster child for this narrative. Her legacy of kindness and charity has exceeded or tolerably mediated her royal whoredom so that this fact has become beside the point. Time has revealed that although she was an actress and a whore, she was also a good woman. Horton’s *Nell Gwynne* (1828) and Jerrold’s *Nell Gwynne* (1833) contain lengthy prologues from the playwright exalting Gwyn’s virtues, a public plea that asks for a reconsideration of any prejudicial feelings that may still be preventing one from appreciating Gwyn’s positive influence on British society. As evidence of Gwyn’s pure heart, Jerrold reprints Nell Gwyn’s will, giving us a chronicle of her thoughtfulness in her own voice. Without exception, all of the mentioned plays portray Gwyn in a positive light. Generally, if these plots require her to be the actress that she is, it is not on the stage. If she is performing, she is performing a part of her own invention in a real-world plot born of her imagination that will set some difficulty right. She is portrayed as generous to a fault, self-sacrificing, and above all self-effacing, perhaps the most important character trait for the actress-whore, which when combined with Gwyn’s wit and good-humor endears her to an audience and to contemporary British society at large.

While these nineteenth century characterizations of Nell Gwyn amount to a passionate defense of a home-grown heroine that attempts to rewrite and secure her historical legacy, Watt Phillips’s drama *Theodora: Actress and Empress* (1866) uses a historical but non-native actress character to dramatize the elevation and punishment of
the unconventional woman. As Roman Empress, Theodora is credited with spearheading
many reforms, influencing her husband to improve conditions for women by expanding
their legal rights. Phillips’s conservative treatment of her, however, does not celebrate
these accomplishments. Instead, the melodrama’s revenge plot invents a first marriage
and an estranged son, the situation manipulated by a jealous third party to facilitate
Empress Theodora’s downfall. Through marriages to great and powerful men, Theodora
goes from being an actress who was “dandled upon the knees” (21) of male patrons to the
most powerful woman in the Empire. The ambitious Theodora is described variously as
an unnatural and wicked woman, a “queen of all allurements” (13), and a “woman
beautiful as an angel, but as fickle and dangerous as yonder smiling sea” (25). Her refrain
of “save me from myself,” while a tactic of the seductress, reinforces the notion of female
excess and loss of control that require intervention. Phillips also underscores the irony
that the great enchantress of men is herself so easily deceived and manipulated. Theodora
fails on multiple fronts: the mother is unable to recognize her own child; the actress
mistakes performance for sincerity.

While Theodora presents a cautionary tale, Arthur W. Pinero’s Trelawny of the
“Wells” (1898) returns to domestic concerns, dramatizing an attempt at social
redemption for the actress character, but ultimately questioning its necessity. Rose
Trelawny barely makes ends meet as one of the most beloved leading actresses of
Barridge Wells Theatre in London. But as the fiancée of the well-born Arthur Gower, she
willingly, even eagerly, complies with the demands of her societal superiors and quits her
profession and her theatre friends to take up residence in posh Cavendish Square, putting
herself under the scrutiny of Arthur’s great-aunt Miss Trafalgar Gower and Vice-Chancellor Sir William Gower, Arthur’s grandfather. The goal is to retrain Rose for genteel life; and because the acting profession is held in such low esteem, even Rose herself sincerely believes this will be a better life. Miss Gower asserts confidently, “I feel sure there are good ingredients in Rose’s character. In time, William, we shall shape her to be a fitting wife for our rash and unfortunate Arthur.”

Because her profession has made her a social outcast—in Rose’s words she is a gypsy—Rose must prove she is not only a woman, but a lady. As her harshest critic, nothing is beyond Miss Gower’s notice: “Rose, Rose! young ladies do not sneeze quite so continuously” (73). Miss Gower hopes that Rose will transform, waking one morning “in a meeker and more submissive spirit” (85-86), proving herself fit for the duties of family and marriage. The often comical discipline Rose receives while at Cavendish Square nonetheless speaks to the perceived need for the establishment to regulate female conduct in order to uphold its institutions. Moreover, the domestication of Rose is an act of reformation and salvation, an attempt at making an incongruous other—an actress—a productive and worthy member of society.

If the prevailing female metaphor of Victorian England is “The Angel in the House,” plays that stage the actress seem to create an alternative but parallel metaphor—“The Angel in the Theatre”—that does the same cultural work of female idealization and containment. The theatrical remaking of Nell Gwyn is a perfect example of this. By virtue of her profession, she cannot be “The Angel in the House,” for the job of actress is conceived as the antithesis of the natural state of woman. But the actress can be regulated to her own domain, that of the theatre, and held up to and rewarded for conforming to
recognizable standards that signal a true femininity and thus render her profession tolerably acceptable. As such, Gwyn’s (real or imagined) generosity, charity, self-effacement, wit, and decency transform her from mere actress to an angel of the theatre. In this same vein, J. Palgrave Simpson’s *World and Stage* (1859) unreservedly depicts the actress as an angel in the theatre and questions the integrity of the angel in the house, promoting an actress ideal of a humble, devoted, dutiful, and self-sacrificing woman.

**J. Palgrave Simpson’s *World and Stage***

> I tell you, we pariahs of the world know more than you might think.
> -Kate Robinson in J. Palgrave Simpson’s *World and Stage*\(^2^4\)

In 1850, after living abroad and traveling extensively throughout central Europe, John Palgrave Simpson returned to his native England to stay. Already a successful and popular columnist and novelist, in the second half of his life he turned to the theatre and pursued a career as a dramatist, eventually even serving as secretary of the Dramatic Author’s Society, the country’s first professional association of British playwrights established in 1833. According to his 1887 *New York Times* obituary, Simpson’s playwriting efforts met “with pronounced success from the outset,” and he “produced about 40 pieces of various kinds, some of which attained considerable popularity in this country.”\(^2^5\) *World and Stage*, which premiered at the Royal Haymarket Theatre in London on 12 March 1859 and at Laura Keene’s Varieties in New York on 12 September of the same year, is one of three popular plays the news article mentions by title.
A classic melodrama in three acts, Simpson’s *World and Stage* uses the actress character to gently satirize a Victorian preoccupation with propriety and respectability that necessarily fosters a disdain for artists. The story revolves around Kate Robinson, a celebrated London actress who has cut herself off from her past and her sister, Lucy, the only family she has, in order to avoid the appearance of impropriety for the sake of her sister’s considerable social position. Born Mary Somers, the stage name Kate Robinson has helped to create distance between the self-consciously unorthodox woman and her blood relation. By creating an alternate persona, Mary conforms to the social conventions that regulate artists like Kate to the periphery. Although it is Kate’s character and conduct that garner the most intense scrutiny, the actress proves herself honorable while her sister’s indecorum requires intervention.

Underlying the play’s intricate plotting and dramatic conflict is the troublesome question of Kate Robinson. In the search for satisfactory answers, information about Kate like evidence in an ongoing trial is presented both for and against the defendant—even the play’s language at times suggests an unseen courtroom. This query into the character of a woman is complicated by the shabby reputation that plagues her chosen profession. At best the Victorian actress was an unconventional woman; at worst she was a profligate, a shameless harlot and sinner, a threat to the moral and social order. As dramatized in *World and Stage*, Kate finds it nearly impossible to distinguish herself against these pervasive and prejudicial notions of the actress, the stigma of her profession contaminating all chance at respectability. In the climatic second act, when Kate is caught in a compromising situation with a man, the mere appearance of impropriety leads to the...
quick assumption of her guilt. Predictably, the actress has transgressed—her indecency a self-fulfilling prophecy. And as is the custom in melodrama, all must seem irrevocably lost before the record is set straight.

“When plaudits came from every nook and corner of a brilliant theatre, my eye would but seek one face of sympathy for the woman, not the actress. Not one face of real friendship was there to greet me. I was alone! . . . Between me and friendship, sympathy, esteem, sisterly love, there stood that spectre—the world’s prejudice” (10) declares Kate, illustrating how the professional identity of the actress takes precedence in the court of public opinion. Under the guise of the theatre performance, the actress may be celebrated; however, once the theatre performance ends so too does the contextual barrier that allows for the safe appreciation of the actress. Beyond the footlights there is little tolerance for the woman who acts: her independence, sexuality, changeability, and “every brightest attribute of her sex” (42) which bring her accolades and success in the profession, make her a target of contempt outside the protective sphere of the theatre. As a result, Kate is an outcast—in her own words, a pariah—her banishment from Westland Manor and her eviction from her hotel suite in France symbolic of her social displacement.

These shifting tensions between acceptance and ostracism, respectability and obscenity are part and parcel of the angel/whore construction. Situating the angel/whore paradigm as the reigning metaphor provides a contextual lens that brings into focus the cultural anxieties expressed in such binaries as proper/improper, decent/indecency, moral/immoral, chaste/wanton, innocent/wicked, woman/actress and world/stage as they
are rhetorically and strategically employed to diagnose female conduct and (de)legitimize the woman actor.

The play’s first act lays the foundation for this central tension between world and stage by dramatizing the strained personal relationships in Kate’s life. Because it was “unthinkable to middle-class Victorians that any woman would freely, willingly choose to whore for a living,” it was not unusual for Victorian families to repudiate their actress-daughters: “Daughters who ‘fell’ from virtue or trod the boards alike found themselves penniless, disinherited, and unprotected by respectable families.”

Likewise, Kate’s career has estranged the two sisters. Kate expresses her surprise and hurt at her callous treatment,

I had only seen the stage before me with its noble dramas and its noble thoughts. I had not seen its enemy—the world—menacing, accusing, smiting with prejudice. The few friends I had latterly known fell back from me. My sister, my own sister, saw me no more. I believe she love me still. But her proud husband forbad her communion with the degraded sister. Was I less pure? Was I less worthy? Was I less estimable, that thus I earned my bread? (10)

In her trademark keen manner, Kate questions the logic that dictates that, by virtue of her profession, she is considered less pure, less worthy, less estimable, less socially desirable.

In an age of theatricality, one of the paradoxes of Victorian culture was its relationship to the theatre, an art form which was adored on the one hand and vilified on the other. As discussed in Chapter 1, the antitheatrical sentiment is deep-rooted, and as perennial outsiders, it inclines to disproportionately reprimand female practitioners. Jonas Barish’s characterization that, like prostitution, the Roman theatre “had become to be thought of as a necessary evil” also seems appropriately descriptive of attitudes in
Victorian England. “As was evil, its practitioners had to be humiliated and punished for their part in it. But as it was necessary, they had also to be prevented from making their escape from it, since its continuance needed to be guaranteed.” 28 In this same vein, the actress must be punished for her depravity, but she must not be eliminated, for she is the foe who gives meaning to the triumph of purity and decency. Sequestering the actress is akin to managing a potential outbreak of disease, a form of systemic control where, in order to maintain a general immunity, the contagion is permitted a highly regulated existence.

The play opens with Kate enjoying her stay at a summer cottage in the country; she chose the rental because it borders Westland Manor, her childhood home, now her sister’s estate. Kate wishes to enjoy proximity to the place of her girlhood without disturbing the manor’s current occupants, Sir Norman and Lady Castlecrag, née Lucy Somers, who are away traveling. Westland Manor was seemingly lost forever when Kate’s father bankrupted the family. His death, followed closely by his wife’s death, left his two young daughters orphaned and homeless. Kate and her sister Lucy were taken in by a kind but poor relation in failing health. Lucy’s fortunes changed for the better when Sir Norman Castlecrag, the baronet who purchased Westland Manor, proposed marriage to Lucy, negotiating a union that restored the manor and respectability to at least one of the Somers daughters. Kate, though, saw a different path for herself. She explains that, “The spirit of independence stirred within me; that spirit was my blessing or my bane, as the world may judge it. Another spirit too was restless within me—the love of art” (9). Determined to make her own way in the world and achieve financial independence that
would allow her to support her “poor old guardian of my days of misery” (9), Mary Somers transformed herself into the stage actress Kate Robinson, fulfilling her career and artistic ambitions, but not without great personal cost.

This part of Kate’s past is revealed through a conversation with Leonard Ashton, who appears at the cottage seeking to introduce himself to the famous Kate Robinson in the hopes of interesting the actress in a play he has written, his debut effort as a playwright. Having at his disposal no other means to break into the theatre business except a cold call to a celebrity, Leonard frets that his future as a playwright hinges on the whimsy of an actress: “All my hopes rest now on the yes or no of one woman—of an actress—of a being, vain, frivolous, capricious, as the world’s experience says they all are. And before this princess of paste, I must bow to beg acceptance of the toil of many a weary hour of thought” (7). Barely able to contain his indignation that an actress’s opinion carries any weight, especially regarding matters of “real” art, Leonard’s attitude makes the gendered double standard clear: men work while women play. Male practitioners are craftsmen who “toil of many a weary hour of thought,” while female practitioners of theatre engage in idle dress-up. The author trumps the actress, legitimizing the pen but not the performance. The irony, of course, is that Leonard’s disdain for the professional theatre actress does not prevent him from seeking his own future happiness in the professional theatre, where we imagine he hopes to craft plays to be performed by the women against whom he discriminates.

The first major melodramatic plot contrivance comes when it is revealed that Leonard is a former suitor of the young Mary Somers. Kate instantly recognizes Leonard
as a dear friend from her past; Leonard, in turn, balks at the discovery that Kate and Mary are one in the same: “You! Kate Robertson? Had your most cherished friend told me this, I had said to him that he lied! From your own mouth alone could I have credited it; and even still I hesitate to believe—” (8). Unperturbed, Kate accurately accesses the hypocrisy of the situation:

> Your words would imply contempt for the actress; and yet I find you here on a visit to Kate Robinson! . . . You worship the art, but you despise its ministers. Why? (proudly) You do not speak. I say in turn—is it possible? Can the youth I have known, so full of truth, of honor, of straightforwardness, have become a mere babbling echo of the world’s prejudice—an unjust judge who condemns on hearsay and without evidence? (8)

Leonard’s protestations are too easy a target for the astute and worldly Kate, but her scolding is ultimately good-natured; she dispatches Leonard’s reproaches easily, even teasingly: “You urge me to quit the stage, and you yourself seek its glories? Does prejudice then teach you that what is degrading for me is in you noble? But come, enough of this! we are friends again, are we not so?” (11), to which Leonard responds, “You have vanquished me” (12). Above all, the outspoken Kate does not brook the gendered double standard that subordinates and stigmatizes women while championing the male contribution. Although Kate is the lone feminist voice, she is more than a mouthpiece. It is the actress’s unimpeachable conduct defying all expectations that provides the material catalyst for the moral lessons of World and Stage.

The revelation of Kate and Leonard’s prior intimacy puts the awkwardness and surprise of their reunion into context. The exposition is given to Kate. Compelled to offer a full explanation of motives and events that conspired to separate and now unexpectedly
reunite the former intimates, the actress deconstructs the present scene. She reveals that her parents looked unfavorably on their youthful attachment because Leonard was poor. After the family’s bankruptcy she felt she could not, under the new circumstances, then “stretch forth my hand to the once-rejected suitor and say, ‘Take me now, Leonard, the ruined heiress—the penniless bride?’” (9). What followed this family misfortune set the sisters on divergent paths. Marriage transfigured Lucy Somers into Lady Castlecrag, her new title a prize signifying her triumph over adversity and a return to the fold. The role of baron’s wife, however, proves an uncomfortable fit. Emotional fulfillment and happiness do not automatically follow station and financial security. For Lucy, the part of baron’s wife is suffocating; her husband’s constant enforcing of the rules of decorum infantilizes Lucy, reducing the young, vibrant woman to mere ornamentation. Kate, on the other hand, chose to strike out on her own and follow her heart’s happiness rather than consent to the role of spinster sister and “become the humble dependant on the rich man’s bounty” (9).

Little did Leonard realize that by soliciting the famous actress Kate Robinson he would again be positioning himself as a suitor to Mary Somers—the woman who dashed all of his romantic hopes as a youth now holds the power to frustrate his professional ambition in his adulthood. But Kate reads the irony of the situation, her ready admission of her complicity in their estrangement an olive branch; her narrative an appeal not only to her girlhood friend but to the aspiring playwright seeking her assistance and who, by virtue of his profession, can surely appreciate the happy denouement of a plot that has caused sadness and difficulty in both their lives. In the renewed spirit of friendship, Kate,
aware that her endorsement will all but guarantee a triumphant debut for Leonard, offers to star in Leonard’s play without even reading his manuscript.

When the identity of the mysterious woman who has taken up residence in the rustic cottage outside Westland Manor’s gates is first revealed, Simpson’s description of Kate is a titillating account of the actress, not the woman. Buzzard, a dandy on a scouting mission on behalf of his associate The Honorable Harry Malpas, accosts Kate’s maid Hepzibah hoping to confirm his suspicions about her mistress: “Spite of the thick veil with which she covers herself—I have discovered in your mysterious lady, the famous Kate Robertson, the celebrated actress, the admired of the stalls, and the applauded of the pit” (4). This glamorous account of the actress is immediately countered by an account of the woman. A long-time gardener on the property, Daniel comes upon the scene and boldly calls Buzzard a liar, explaining that he has “known this young woman’s [Hepzibah’s] mistress ever since she were a wee little lass, no higher than that, when I was gardener’s boy at Westland Manor there, in her poor father’s time; and she is a good and virtuous young woman.” In defense of Kate’s honor, Daniel even threatens physical harm: “and if I catch you coming here with a foul pack of lies in your ugly mouth again, I may chance to dust your coat for you in another fashion” (5). Buzzard and Daniel’s lively misunderstanding anticipates Leonard’s own astonishment when he discovers that the actress he seeks is also the woman he loved.

This confusion over Kate’s true identity—whether she is indeed a (in)famous actress or simply a private, respectable lady—is exemplary of the competing narratives of world and stage, and more specifically a symptom of the actress-as-whore metaphor,
which renders it inconceivable that such a good and virtuous young woman is one and the same celebrated actress. To Daniel, the suggestion is an insult, blasphemy even. But the proposition also suggests its inverse, that an actress is not a good and virtuous woman. Despite the formal fallacy of the argument, its conclusions are rhetorically potent, especially in a patriarchal culture with an ambivalent relationship to the art of performance, and further, one where the conceits of performance are personified as female.

Protective of the lodger whom Daniel has rightly recognized as Mary Somers, he succeeds in shooing Buzzard away. Buzzard’s parting words, “Have it all your own way. The lady is of course a model of virtue” (5) smack of sarcasm and strike the first blow against the respectability of the woman who acts, echoing the social prejudice against the actress that antagonizes Kate throughout the play. At his retreat, Buzzard’s issues a warning: “And tell her, however closely the flimsy cover may be tied down, the flies are sure to swarm about the honey pot” (5).

As has been discussed, Buzzard’s honey pot metaphor is borrowed from Restoration writer Tom Brown, whose claim “‘tis hard a matter for a pretty Woman to keep herself Honest in a Theatre, as ‘tis for an Apothecary to keep his Treacle from the flies in hot Weather; for every Libertine in the Audience will be buzzing about her Honey-Pot”29 is commonly referenced by historians and scholars as a pat illustration of early modern attitudes toward the professional actress. The Restoration quip styles the intersection of woman and actress in overtly sexual terms and testifies that the loss of female virtue is an inevitable, even natural occurrence in the playhouse setting. The
suggestion is that the honey pot of female genitalia cannot be contained in any manner that altogether discourages male attention; the possibility would be against nature. Just like the hot weather agitates the flies so does the display of the female actress on the playhouse stage stir the male audience to attention and action. As the appropriately named Buzzard cautions, no disguise is sufficient enough to thwart amorous male admirers from pursuing the actress-object of their desire. In this scenario, even the theatre profession itself seemingly turns into facilitator of male sexual gratification with the actress as barter. In this sense, the actress is an offering of the theatre, just like the prostitute is an offering of the brothel, both establishments catering to their male patrons. This view of the actress as a sexual commodity permeates the play and incites the string of complications that comprise the plot. Simpson treatment of the issue, contained as it is within the formulaic conventions of melodrama, results in interestingly polite yet forthright moral lesson.

Although a comparatively minor character, the simpleminded laborer Daniel is positioned from the outset to enjoy a degree of moral triumph over his social superiors. Clearly a product of rural values, Daniel is notable not because he parrots the bourgeois prejudice against the stage but because when confronted with the facts he assuredly rejects the myth. Daniel’s account is illuminating: “I’ze always heard as how play actresses were no better nor they should be. Granny always said so, though I fancy she’d a notion they somehow growed horns and hoofs, and a what-you-may-call-’em” (16, italics added). That Daniel has been taught (directly or indirectly) and believes the stage is a proverbial den of iniquity is no surprise; it reinforces our understanding of how
ideology functions in society and makes Simpson’s point that, city or country, high or low society, there is no escape from judgment for the actress in contemporary Victorian culture.

Daniel’s conversion is rather touchingly dramatized. Because he has known Kate since she was born, he is protective of her. He is depicted as a brawny fellow willing to “pitch into them” (16) that dare harass Kate, indicative not of his violent nature but of the tender and fatherly instincts Kate brings out in him: “Well, I don’t quite understand; but I’ve got a heart in my bosom to love and reverence you, Miss Mary, and to protect you too for the matter o’ that” (16). Alarmed, but not wanting to offend a woman he knows and respects as a lady, he asks to be able to speak his mind without offence. Daniel’s blunt interrogation of Kate, “Look ye, Miss Mary, they say as how you act in plays!” (16) is an instructive moment that issues a challenge, somewhat humorously, to the established social order. Daniel is clearly Kate’s subordinate, but here he issues a moral challenge that momentarily undermines her position of authority, easily accomplished because, while Daniel is a man of no rank, Kate really is an actress, and regardless of her past standing, the stigma of her current profession positions her firmly beyond the pale of decency and consideration. As Tracy C. Davis has argued, the association of actress with prostitute was automatic and nearly indelible in the minds of Victorians,

No matter how consummate the artist, pre-eminent the favourite, and modest the woman, the actress could not supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be ‘hired’ for amusement by all who could command the price. For a large section of society, the similarities between the actress’s life and the prostitute’s or demi-mondaine’s were unforgettable and overruled all other evidence about respectability. She was “no better than she should be.”30

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Ironically, such a correlation accentuates female professionalism in a way that undermines the actress’s respectability as a woman. The actress’s rejection of domesticity for the cultivation of a public persona becomes socially and morally suspect; her pursuit of financial independence, a particularly “unfeminine” trait, is perceived as a threat to male hegemony. As explicitly voiced by Daniel, this conviction that the actress is “no better than she should be”—in other words, is promiscuous—sets the moral tone against which the cold and unkind treatment Kate receives at the hands of her relatives is deemed acceptable, even necessary.

Given the opportunity, Daniel breaks away from the grip of group think. Although he has been taught to expect actresses to be distinguished by horns and hoofs, a demonic outward branding of inward depravity and spiritual bankruptcy, his experience of Kate is empirical evidence to the contrary: “Now when I look at your pretty hands and feet, and as I know that your own pure little heart can’t be growed worse, nor your feet and hands—why—I says to myself, that there must be somehow a mistake about my grandmother’s notions” (16). Daniel’s amusing dismantling of the absurd metaphor of actress as devilish fiend is perhaps the exception that proves the rule outlined above by Davis, that the perception of the actress as immoral whore was a sentence of guilty until proven innocent and not easily overturned by any “other evidence about respectability.”

Similar to the distinctive Yankee character of American melodrama, the country bumpkin Daniel functions as a “natural” bringing candor and sincerity to the situation. Daniel can assert himself and make up his own mind about Kate’s respectability because, like the rural Yankee, he is not beholden to the same ideological constraints that dictate
“polite” society. Derogatorily referred to as a “sportive rustic” by Buzzard and a bulldog by Malpas, Daniel is not mannered but manly, not polished but perceptive; his native simplicity is the barometer against which social change can ultimately be measured. That he devotes his services to Kate is a testament to her worthiness. That he wants nothing from Kate in return passes judgment on the other more “respectable” people that circle Kate’s life—even her renewed friendship with Leonard demands a price from Kate.

The inherent public nature of performance helped to foster the common perception that the actress whored herself to make a living. In Victorian society, “respectable” women did not work outside the home, doing so flagrantly “defied socioeconomic prescriptions about Good Women.” This brazen behavior left women open to moralistic condemnation that essentially propagated the notion that an aspiration to financial independence was sexually suspect. A career on the stage was tantamount to a return to the oldest profession, prostitution, an expression of the pervasive notion that a woman’s body is her only currency, her only path of self-determination. The easy parallel of performance and prostitution created a perception that the actress was public property, and as depicted in World and Stage this expectation compromised the integrity of even the most modest of working theatre women.

When Kate tries to politely refuse The Honorable Harry Malpas’s unannounced visit to the cottage by protesting that he is a stranger to her, Malpas’s response dismisses her concern for propriety alluding instead to an intimacy born of the experience of the theatre performance that grants him special quarter: “But you, madam, are no stranger to me. You can be to none who have taste, appreciation, heart to worship, or hand to
applaud. Surrounded as is the great artist with her host of adorers—of fervent appreciators, I should say, surely a man may be pardoned tendering his homage, when his poor voice is no longer lost amidst the crowd” (14). The actress’s appeal for social protocol is easily dismissed as no more than a pretense to a respectability that is not hers to claim. Thus, Malpas’s intrusion is not only excusable, it is required: “For is it not the business of every man of true gallantry to pay his humble tribute to beauty?” (15). This notion that the actress has made herself publically known and therefore the woman who is the actress is indebted to her admirers to maintain the intimacy of acquaintance off stage breaches the protective contextual barrier which allows the public woman a private persona. Leonard expresses his frustration at this persistent encroachment into Kate’s private life when he declares, “You are always my own lovely Mary; for I cannot call you by that name, Kate, which belongs only to the herd” (28), a symbolic gesture wherein he attempts to stake his own claim on the actress.

While the first act clearly positions Kate as the protagonist, she is at the same time the suspect Other who disrupts the status quo. As expected, Kate’s plan to avoid Sir Norman and Lady Castlecrag fails. The couple has returned early and favorable reports of their temporary tenant have Lady Castlecrag eager to make her acquaintance: “The housekeeper tells me she has done so much good in charity since she has been here—visited the sick, attended to the children of my schools—I would know something more of her—make her acquaintance—thank her from my whole heart” (19). When pressed for details, Daniel protects Kate’s identity as best he can. Before he escapes the scene, he offers this endorsement of the person in question, “I know, your honour—I know that
she’s an angel, but that’s all I know, and enough too, I think” (19). But it is not enough. A gardener’s opinion carries no weight with the venerable Sir Norman, and to his mind, that Lady Castlecrag would allow herself to be “swayed by low judgment shows once more how defective must have been your education, as regards the proper feeling due to your position in the world” (19-20).

The primary preoccupation of World and Stage is the diagnosing of moral character, an inquiry complicated by genteel society’s apprehensive relationship to the professional stage actress and dramatized through the machinations of Sir Norman and his constant companion, Miss Lipglue, a distant relative whose “high sense of what is due to position in the world” (20) serves as Sir Norman’s moral compass. True to form, Sir Norman teams up with Miss Lipglue to rebuke his wife for rashly seeking out the acquaintance a stranger, for who knows what kind of woman this person might be:

SIR N. Now, Lady Castlecrag, as regards this—lady! Yes! we will give her the benefit of the doubt and call her “lady!”—I have not thwarted your inclination to seek her acquaintance, but with caution, and the utmost diplomatic tact. Should she prove to be a—a——
MISS L. (with horror) A nobody knows who.
SIR N. Exactly so. Then, after taking hasty steps, what would be your regrets?
MISS L. And what would the world say? (20)

In its various forms, the refrain “what would the world say” punctuates the dialogue. An Althusserian model allows us to understand this invocation as a constant reminder of the influence exerted by various ideological state apparatuses. Along these lines, Miss Lipglue, a self-proclaimed arbiter of ethics, represents the church and its religious doctrine. She is an adherent to Dr. Tight, crediting her faultless moral judgment to his teachings about “the vile worthiness of all humanity living beyond the pale of good
society” (20). When it is discovered that the benevolent tenant Lady Castlecrag wishes to meet is a well-known actress, in fact making any acquaintance quite inappropriate, Miss Lipglue smugly replies, “And what would the world have said? And good Dr. Tight, who preaches such exemplary sermons against the stage?” (22). Although he is not a character in the play, the humorously named Dr. Tight’s presence is felt. Miss Lipglue’s personal refrain of “What would Dr. Tight say?” (47) mirrors the play’s general slogan “what would the world say?”, though, instead of competing against each other Simpson shows the church and world linked together against Kate, both not only claiming the same tight, vice-grip hold on morality but also prescribing the same social dogma.

The news that the tenant who has been praised in the neighborhood for her generosity is a well-known actress immediately fixes Sir Norman and Miss Lipglue’s opinion of a woman they (believe they) have never personally met. “And she presumes to come here dispensing her charities,” admonishes Sir Norman, to which Miss Lipglue responds, “Charity indeed! hypocrisy!” (22), staying perfectly in step with the voice of patriarchal authority. That Kate’s chosen profession invalidates her philanthropy is another even more insidious consequence of the perception of the actress as “no better than she should be.” The actress’s charity work is regarded as hypocritical because pure, disinterested giving cannot be part of the repertoire of a woman as “vain, frivolous, capricious” and morally depraved as an actress. Additionally, such philanthropy is read as an encroachment into respectable society, a usurpation of the duties of the gentlewoman that betrays a presumptuous aspiration to social respectability. When it is revealed that the actress in question is none other than Kate Robinson, Sir Norman acts quickly to
remove his wife from the scene before she can speak to her sister. His declaration, “I will take care that she is kept from contamination” (23), perfectly characterizes the threat that the actress represents to the established order.

Theatre was anathema to the Victorian brand of spirituality that in the face of developing scientific theories of an infinite and unknowable universe above all relied on faith in an immutable true self.\textsuperscript{32} By its very nature, performance imperiled this belief. Actresses (and actors), who could assume various personas and inhabit and exhibit thoughts and feelings that were not their own, peddled in deceit and illusion, risking the integrity of the self for performer and spectator alike. Nina Auerbach characterizes the Victorian theatre as a “subversive anticulture whose illusions and seductions lured souls away” (16). Jonas Barish’s work on the enduring antitheatrical prejudice helps contextualize the “ontological danger of believing in others’ performances”:\textsuperscript{33}

For when a player has given over his consciousness to some form of identification with a character, or when a spectator, identifying with that character, has done the same, what happens to his own self? Is it suspended somehow for the duration of performance? And if so, is this not a spiritually dangerous state of affairs? Does it not in fact resemble demonic possession?\textsuperscript{34}

Insofar as hooves and horns, demonic possession, and the luring away of souls belong to the purview of the actress, the theatre is branded a moral and mortal enemy of the world.

The steady parade of visitors and surprise encounters that occupy the first act of \textit{World and Stage} allow for the introduction of the spectrum of contrary attitudes toward the actress and the morality of the stage profession. Beneath this flurry of activity, it is the question of Kate’s true identity and the accompanying anxiety over whether that truth can objectively be known that provides the fuel for much of the play’s action: is the
mystery woman the respectable and charitable Mary Somers or the shameless “princess of paste” Kate Robinson? Is she the wholesome angel that Daniel declares her to be and Leonard hopes she is, or the dangerous hussy that has been banished by Sir Norman and repudiated by Miss Lipglue? In the second and third acts, Kate’s efforts to protect her sister from disgrace ultimately redeem the actress, humbling and silencing her critics once and for all.

After witnessing Lady Castlecrag surreptitiously receive a note from Malpas, the curtain comes down on the first act with Kate vowing to stop her sister from pursuing an affair that will scandalize her: “Yes, I can save her; and I will!” (24, italics in original). The second act takes place in a room in Kate’s London house. Containing a dividing screen and several interior doors, the space allows for multiple hiding places and features a concealed back staircase from Kate’s boudoir, a room that, according to Daniel, impudent young fellows who profess love for his mistress call her “sulky-box”; humorously, Daniel rejects the idea that his mistress is glum, altogether missing the sexual innuendo. Hepzibah reassuringly reports that Kate always keeps the door to the back stairs locked, the key in her own control. Mirroring the previous act, various agendas will compel everyone to seek out Kate, resulting in a series of near misses, surprise meetings, and the employ of the forbidden back stairs that will cause Kate’s plot to save her sister to spiral out of control, turning Kate’s good intensions into additional ammunition for her detractors.

Believing Kate is ready to recant her recalcitrant ways, Lucy agrees to Kate’s urgent request for a meeting, traveling to her sister’s house “closely veiled” to conceal
her identity—“Spite of my husband’s prohibition—at the risk of my name and character” (36). “I see it all,” says Lucy. “You repent the fearful step you have taken—your degrading position preys on you. . . . Throw off this deep disgrace. It is not too late to shun the fearful precipice on the brink of which you stand. . . . ‘tis plain you need my help. What can I do to save you?” (36). However, the tears in Kate’s eyes that prompt this sympathetic reaction from Lucy are not for herself but for her sister. In fact, Kate is so distracted with worry about Lucy that she cannot concentrate on rehearsing the evening’s part. As Kate sees it, Lucy’s name and character are indeed in great danger, not from someone discovering she dared to visit an actress, as is Lucy’s fear, but from Lucy’s clandestine relationship with Malpas, about which Daniel has gathered intelligence confirming their secret liaisons. Lucy tries to dismiss Kate’s concern, characterizing her contact with Malpas as “a mere drawing room flirtation, which foreign usage sanctions—society smiles upon—and the world holds innocent” (37). Lucy goes so far as to become indignant at Kate’s accusation, perhaps protesting too much that her “character stands high above such base suspicion” (38). Unlike her actress-sister, the married, settled, gentlewoman Lucy has all the outward appearance of decency and honor, positioning her solidly beyond reproach. But finally, after Kate makes it clear she knows Lucy’s secret, Lucy tearfully and fearfully admits that she has been entertaining a lover’s courtship, risking her marriage, reputation, and the world’s censure. This is a pivotal moment where the actress claims the moral high ground, which, incidentally, has always been hers. When Kate advises Lucy, “It is not too late to shun the fearful precipice on the brink of which you stand,” Kate’s appropriation of Lucy’s own admonition against the actress
now used even more pertinently against the upstanding Lady Castlecrag underscores the shift in power.

Kate’s plot to extricate her sister from her dangerous dalliance with Malpas hinges on obtaining Lucy’s love letters from his possession, thus regaining control of the only tangible evidence of Lucy’s indiscretion and removing Lucy from Malpas’s power. The play’s three so-called love triangles converge on the opportunist Malpas, whose name translates from the French as “not bad,” the veneer of cosmopolitan respectability testified to by his honorific “The Hon.” affords him sufficient cover to insert himself “harmlessly” into society and gain the trust of its gate-keepers like Sir Norman and Miss Lipglue. While Malpas seeks to make a cuckold of Sir Norman with Lucy, he also pursues the glamorous Kate, unaware that the two women are sisters, an agenda that allows Kate access to him on her sister’s behalf without raising his suspicion. Kate’s secret maneuverings, however, cause the already insecure Leonard additional distress. He is unplacated by Kate’s declarations of her love for him or her promise that her obvious secrecy is necessary, temporary, and will be known to him shortly. “Why mystery, if not for evil?” (40), Leonard accuses. Presuming his actress-fiancée to be involved in some kind of affair of the heart that will cause him embarrassment and shame, he longs for the domestic certainty of a husband’s authority over a wife: “I own my spirit is uneasy,” he admits, “until the name of husband gives me a right to spurn from your door the swarm of silly fops who court your favours.—Favours! the very word fevers my blood. (tossing over letters on table) Look here! a hundred billets doux for the fair Kate!” (29). Although Kate tries to reassure Leonard that his jealousy is unfounded, that he alone enjoys “a
privilege beyond the public” (28), he doubts the constancy of Kate’s heart, once again calling into question the actress’s virtue: “Ah, were you not by your public position exposed to those attacks—” (30). Yes, the actress has her admirers, but the deeper implication here is that the public woman is necessarily frail and wonton, unable to withstand the many sexual temptations she invites by virtue of her professional life—“The flies about the honey-pot!” (13). For Leonard, his misgivings about the actress seem to trump his faith in the woman—even if he could trust Mary, he would be ill-advised to trust Kate. Kate again turns the tables, deriding Leonard’s belittling characterization of the actress as a notorious receiver and bestower of “favour” by pointedly reminding him of his stake: “What, still the old prejudice? shall I then refuse to play again—flying up my task—that which is to give name and fame to Leonard Ashton?” (30).

During the scene Kate stages to trick Malpas into giving up Lucy’s letters, the actress plays the part of the flattered beauty, and true to form Malpas seizes his opportunity, promising the following display of his devotion: “I am content to destroy in your presence every vestige of the past; for in truth, you, you, Kate, are the only woman whom I love—have ever loved” (43). Lucy, who has been eavesdropping, cannot help but react at this proof of Malpas’s debauchery and her foolishness; she rashly confronts Malpas, not only ruining the victory that Kate had in hand, but also giving Malpas the opportunity to spin the situation to his advantage. Angered that he has been “Duped by an actress” (44), Malpas portrays himself as the hapless victim of the actress-sorceress whose “confounded treachery” (45) befits one “so experienced in her art” (44).
The arrival of Sir Norman, Miss Lipglue, and Buzzard interrupts the safe exits of Lucy and Malpas from Kate’s home. While Lucy retreats down the back stairs barely escaping her husband’s notice, Malpas picks an opportune moment to reveal himself to Kate’s newly arrived visitors, deliberately embarrassing her. Affecting nonchalance and privilege, Malpas stages his own scene, allowing (even encouraging) his presence to be misconstrued, effectively using the actress’s marginal social position to his advantage.

The discovery of a concealed man in Kate’s home while momentarily shocking is not altogether unexpected; it essentially confirms what Sir Norman and Miss Lipglue know to be true about the actress and squares with their understanding of what would go on in a “hussey’s home” (46). For the many witnesses, this incident seems to be irrefutable proof of Kate’s licentiousness, prompting Sir Norman to render his verdict, “We have evidence sufficient, I think, to justify my opinion as to the morality of the stage” (49), and Miss Lipglue to once again invoke Dr. Tight’s example. But it is Leonard’s quick accusation that truly condemns. Unwilling to consider that the situation is not what it seems, Leonard walks out of Kate’s life: “Farewell! You have acted well your deceitful part; but the curtain falls upon it now for ever” (50). Seemingly caught in the act, Kate’s words are insufficient to combat appearances however false. The perception of the actress as a natural deceiver goes hand in hand with the assumption of her guilt in such matters of propriety, for the nonconforming woman forfeits the benefit of the doubt, a tacit to contain the destabilizing threat to the patriarchal authority of being “duped by an actress.”

Act 3 takes place in a common room of the Hotel de France in Nice where Sir Norman, dissatisfied with the rooms that are available, requests that the hotel ask an
English woman traveling only with her maid to yield her large suite to his party, even though she is “an invalid, pale” (52) and despite Lady Castlecrag’s entreaty that they should not “disturb a lady in ill health” (52). Echoing the first act, the final act presents several mysteries to be solved. There is, firstly, the question of the identity of the lady who graciously agrees to move to the smaller apartment: “I am glad to find she has a proper sense of what is due between gentlefolks” (55), offers Sir Norman contentedly. Moreover, Sir Norman grapples with the identity of his secret benefactor. It seems that Sir Norman is on the brink of financial ruin, having engaged unsuccessfully in mercantile speculations. “Can I forget that I have been obliged to mortgage Westland Manor, and come to live for a time abroad, and exercise disgusting economy, madam? Am I not upon tenter hooks to know who is this mysterious personage who has advanced the money upon the mortgage, and who now holds Westland Manor in his grip, madam?” (52-53).

Lastly, Lady Castlecrag is anxious for news about her sister, whom she has had no communication with “since that terrible scene!” (53). The papers reported that Kate Robinson “left England for America, after a fever which seized her before the public on the stage one night—that night” (55), and since Lucy’s letters to Kate have gone unanswered, she fears that Kate is dead. Malpas and Buzard have also made the trip abroad, and along with Leonard provide the requisite plot coincidences and twists before it can be revealed that not only is Kate Robinson alive, she is the woman whom Sir Norman has displaced at the hotel as well as his anonymous rescuer from financial ruin.

In true melodramatic fashion, letters stolen, misdirected, and containing secret information drive the action toward a resolution in the final act. Because Malpas has
intercepted all letters between Lucy and Kate, he learns the secret that they are sisters; and the unanswered letters on both sides lead each woman to think the other has permanently shunned her. Now armed with the damaging truth of the Somers family, Malpas redoubles his efforts to entrap Lucy, driven more by revenge than love: “But you have aroused another feeling in my heart, more powerful even than my love. My pride has been deeply wounded; and the web is woven around you with such resistless force, that, struggle as you may, poor fly, you are in my claws.” For insurance, Malpas has brought the bundle of Lucy’s love letters to France: “These letters never shall be yours, until, mine and mine alone, you no longer care for their possession. How nigh the weapon was wrenched from my grasp, by that designing woman’s artifice!” (68). He threatens to expose Lucy’s many secrets should she not agree to an elopement.

Meanwhile, the incognito Kate is besieged by familiar strains of prejudice: “Miss Kate Robinson was a young woman of detestable character . . . In truth, what connection could my dear Lady Castlecrag have with a creature so disreputable?” (62), offers the gossip Lady Fanny who, after failing to get confirmation from Lady Castlecrag, alleges to have never believed the shocking reports linking Sir Norman’s wife to a sister-actress. A boastful Miss Lipglue chimes in with additional evidence, “I happen to know parties of unimpeachable veracity who can testify to the impropriety of that female’s conduct, in seducing away amiable young men of family (looking at Buzzard) who have since repented of their errors” (62). Kate, not privy to Lady Castlecrag’s private struggle at being commanded by Sir Norman to “look unconcerned” at hearing her sister whom she believes is most likely dead being thus maligned, is deeply hurt that Lucy, in the face of
such malicious slander, offers only her silent approval. Finally, it is all too much for Kate to bear; since no one will come to her aid she must speak on her own behalf. But before she can reveal herself to confront her detractors, Leonard Ashton appears on the scene, and in white-knight fashion “defend[s] her fame against sweeping accusations, as foul as false” (62). He especially admonishes Sir Norman for lending his “tongue to so vile an aspersion” (63).

The defining moment for Kate follows shortly after this distressing scene when she finally and very dramatically reveals her presence by snatching out of Malpas’s hand the love letters he quite literally holds over Lucy as part of his arsenal designed to bring about the elopement. “Foiled again—and by that woman!” (71) cries Malpas, while Lucy starts as if she has seen a ghost. Kate explains her motives, “I came hither unknown, unheeded, to watch over and defend one, whose happiness and welfare have been more dear to me than my own” (72). But she feels betrayed by Lucy’s previous failure to act on her behalf, mistakenly believing that her sister has disavowed her very existence. With the evidence secure, Kate considers seizing upon this opportunity to clear her name and restore her reputation: “These letters can prove to the maligning world, it was not Kate Robertson—it was my Lady Castlecrag, whose fair name was sullied, whose purity was tainted by a love—no, ‘love’ I will not call it—of a base heartless man!” Thinking of her broken engagement with Leonard, she speculates that, “These letters may give me back all I have lost—all I regret so bitterly—I have them in my power” (72). The choice, though, is not simple: to exonerate herself, she must incriminate Lucy. When Lucy nobly accepts her fate, calling for her sister to use the letters to set the record straight, Lucy’s
sisterly sacrifice restores Kate’s faith in her purpose. Kate pitches the letters into the fire exclaiming,

Done! I have struggled with the tempter at my heart; and I have vanquished him! They burn—they burn! Those evidences of my innocence; and yet I feel a great and holy joy. Be happy, my sister; you are released from an ignoble bondage! Once more your honour and your name are saved; once more Kate Robertson gives her honour to the buffets of the world! Fear not for her; she can be happy in the consciousness of the right, even if she succumb beneath the blow. (72)

At this, the stage direction indicates that Kate staggers, a physical marker of the emotional toll her brave and tenacious pursuit of “the consciousness of the right” in the face discrimination and hostility has taken.

The final vindication for the actress’s honor comes from the patriarch Sir Norman himself, who has received an urgent communication from his London lawyer regarding the status of the mortgage on Westland Manor. “This letter,” says Sir Norman, “informs me that the mortgage effected upon Westland Manor has been returned into my hands.” Addressing Kate he continues, “the same letter tells me that a secret—your secret—has been betrayed. The hand that saved me from approaching ruin was that of—of Mary Somers” (74). As Sir Norman protests that he could never accept such assistance from Kate, Malpas finally behaves like the gentleman he had pretended to be, making good on his promise to the sisters to guard the past from the “false interpretations of the world” (73). Interrupting Sir Norman, he sets the record straight, “One word, Sir Norman! I affirm, and I affirm with truth, although with shame, that vanity alone induced me to permit the belief that Miss Kate Robertson had done ought but disdain my addresses” (74-75). Malpas’s admission is enough to acquit Kate of the crime of debauchery. As a
result, Leonard comprehends his folly, admitting that jealousy blinded him to the truth. Interestingly, he wonders how he could ever forgive himself, rather than asking if Kate could ever forgive him, which seems to be the more pertinent question. Sir Norman concedes that he has “foully” misjudged Kate, but even so cannot accept the mortgage papers from her. “I take them back,” Kate says, “but to entrust them to the care of one in the safe keeping of whose honour they may best be placed—that of your wife, Sir Norman,” to which Sir Norman replies, “Madam—Mary—sister—you have vanquished me” (75).

Throughout the play, Kate is seemingly on trial, the charges brought by an elusive prosecution representing the “world’s” bias against the professional actress, the evidence in the form of a steady stream of hearsay, slander, and rumor. Preconceptions about the actress make mounting a defense difficult. Mistrust of the woman who is regarded as a mistress of deception places the burden of proof on her innocence rather than her guilt. Above all, her perceived sexual prowess devalues her moral character branding her a sinner and a whore. The melodramatic conventions in *World and Stage* of misinformation, mistaken identity, and extravagant coincidence create an atmosphere where innuendo, calumny, and scandal temporarily flourish, fortifying the damning narrative against the actress. But where words fail to articulate a defense, it is Kate’s conduct, a product of her unwavering faith in the “consciousness of right,” set against the questionable actions of her social and moral superiors that ultimately and conclusively vindicates her as well as shatters prejudiced notions about the quality and content of her character.
As a result, the actress character itself functions ironically, a red herring of sorts designed to cultivate the expectation of bad behavior and lewdness both within and outside of the dramatic world of the play. Instead of Kate, it is her married sister, the respectable Lady Castlecrag, who entertains a lover’s courtship. Unlike her sister, Lucy enjoys the protection of social convention that holds innocent such a “drawing room flirtation” and affords her the benefit of the doubt concerning her behavior. And even though this indiscretion takes place under Sir Norman’s constant gaze, the baron is too concerned about the appearance of impropriety to recognize it when it actually occurs, even in his own house. Both he and Miss Lipglue’s unconditional acceptance of the schemers Malpas and Buzzard cast the former as the real dupes who, despite their own pretensions, are hoodwinked by the flashy performance of culture and manners. That Sir Norman fails in his business venture perhaps also speaks to his poor judgment in choosing his associates. As for Miss Lipglue, the champion of propriety shamelessly allows herself to feel flattered by Buzzard’s effete attentions, when he really only seeks to create a distraction for his friend Malpas to court Lucy. Miss Lipglue is so self-deluded that she eagerly agrees to an elopement that was not even intended for her. And at the first test of their relationship, Leonard abandons his actress-fiancée, his defection a testament to his lack of fidelity not hers. But throughout, Kate remains loyal to family and friends, a secret guardian of her sister’s happiness and welfare, willing to sacrifice her reputation to the “false interpretations of the world” to keep Lucy safe from censure. Her conduct is never not in accord with the high moral standards that are professed by others who, ironically, fail to act with equal decorum. Ultimately, expectations are
overturned when the actress proves to be trustworthy, humble, and self-sacrificing rather than fiendish, vain, and dissolute.

In a play seemingly titled to call to mind the Shakespearean conceit “All the world’s a stage,” then all the men and women in Simpson’s *World and Stage* are merely players; yet, even so, some still appear to be more equal than others. Even though Sir Norman’s concession that he has “been taught that there is a prejudice among us in the world, cruel as false, and that, on the stage, virtue may still pursue a steady path” (75-76) may signal an approaching paradigm shift, the protective divide between world and stage remains firmly in place. A conservative form, melodrama gives expression to certain societal fears and anxieties but, in the end, confirms the world order as it is known rather than dismantles it. Although the actress speaks the final words of the play, the sentiment is calculated to appease rather than celebrate: “Sir Norman, my course will still be sundered from that, your station claims for you. The hand of my truest friend, my husband, (*takes Leonard’s hand*) will support me. Yet we may still think kindly of each other, although your part be played in the great World, and mine be on the Stage” (76).

Kate asks for sympathy and respect for the actress, but does not seem to go so far as to ask for acceptance. It is a subtle but important distinction, which allows room for the satirical treatment of Victorian affectation without altogether offending the ascendancy. The actress’s epilogue, which reiterates her plight and her modest claim for courtesy, appeals directly to the “players” playing their parts on the broader, meta-stage of the world:

> Oft as the actress, friendless, and alone,
> Seeking the “spark divine” she’d made her own,
Devotes her sleepless nights, her anxious days
To weary study, wearier care, for praise,
The world nor knows, nor heeds her struggles bold
’Gainst poverty, temptation, lures of gold!
Whilst hands applaud, the breath of scandal rails—
The public lauds, but prejudice assails.—
Dear are the plaudits that ensure her fame,
But dear the world’s esteem: and she would claim
From the more generous spirit of the age
A kindlier feeling betwixt WORLD AND STAGE! (76)

In *World and Stage* the relentless scrutiny of Kate speaks to the cultural anxieties surrounding the actress, while at the same time Simpson’s depiction of Kate suggests that it is the actress, rather than her social betters, who holds the moral high ground. Kate uses her skills as an actress to rescue her married sister from a scandalous liaison, not only by playing the necessary part of coquette but by creating the entire scenario that will secure Lucy’s freedom, so that the actress is also the playwright. Throughout the play Kate plays this part of author, orchestrating situations that bring about the greatest good for her sister’s family, a display of devotion as well as creativity that reflexively calls attention to Simpson’s own position as playwright, his sympathetic portrait of the theatre, and the ways in which the multi-faceted actress character acts as a defense for the profession.
Endnotes


3 Davis 19.

4 Davis 71.

5 Davis 97.


8 The “Angel in the House” is a poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854, which became very popular later in the century. The phrase “angel in the house” represented and continues to represent a feminine ideal of a selfless, loving, devoted, compliant, dutiful, and docile mother and wife.

9 Powell 10, italics in original.

10 Powell 10.

11 Powell 10.

12 Powell 17.


14 Auerbach 1.

15 Auerbach 9.

16 Auerbach 206.

17 Powell 3. This is also this chapter’s epigraph.

Nell Gwyn also makes appearances in George Bernard Shaw’s *In Good King Charles’s Golden Days: A History Lesson in Three Scenes* in 1939. She is a minor character in Barker’s *Victory* (1983). Another notable play featuring Nell Gwyn is Liz Duffy’s *Or*, which premiered in New York in 2009.


24 J. Palgrave Simpson, *World and Stage* (London: Samuel French, n.d.) 43. All subsequent references from the play are from this publication and will be given as parenthetical citations.


30 Davis 69.

31 Davis 71.

32 See Auerbach, *Private* 3.

33 Auerbach, *Private* 11.

34 Qtd. in Auerbach, *Private* 11-12.
On the critical demand for women’s right to sexual expressiveness and personality or self-development, female performers clearly constituted a kind of proto-feminist vanguard. The creativity with which female performers put these cultural blasphemies into practice in the years between 1880 and 1910 laid some of the groundwork for feminism even before the term was coined. Precisely for that reason, both the theater and the proto-feminist figure of the actress became important symbols and resources for female activists who engaged in various forms of political agitation in the first decade of the twentieth century.

-Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*

New York’s first theatre scandal of the twentieth century involved the arrest and prosecution of British actress-manager Olga Nethersole, whose production *Sapho* had opened at Wallack’s Theatre on Broadway on 5 February 1900 to a flurry of criticism for its depiction of a sexually transgressive women with a secret past who, for a time, finds happiness and love. Not only did Nethersole play *Sapho*’s paramour Fanny, she was the show’s producer. After twenty-nine performances, the production was temporarily shut down by the police on 5 March 1900. Nethersole, her personal manager, the Wallack’s Theatre manager, and the show’s male lead were arrested, charged with corrupting public decency, and given a jury trial that lasted three days. After the judge in the case instructed
the jury that they were “not the guardians of the morals of this community,” it took only fifteen minutes of deliberation for them to return a verdict of not guilty.

The 1900 play is an adaptation by American playwright Clyde Fitch of Alphonse Daudet’s 1884 novel *Sapho*, which Nethersole had commissioned as a vehicle for herself. It tells the story of Fanny Le Grand, a courtesan and artist’s muse, who falls deeply in love with a younger man, Jean Gaussin, a poor art student. Accepting that Jean will never marry her, she nonetheless convinces him to allow her to live with him, and becomes for all practical purposes his wife. Fanny and Jean’s happy and quiet life together is destroyed when Fanny’s illegitimate son surfaces and Jean, betrayed by this revelation, leaves her. When the father of Fanny’s child is pardoned from prison and returns to her with declarations of his undying love as well as a timely new inheritance, Fanny, for the sake of her child, accepts his proposal, walking away from Jean forever, even though the love of her life has reappeared begging forgiveness and desiring to reconcile. While the French novel is told from Jean’s point of view, Fitch’s play is told from Fanny’s perspective.

There was a loud public outcry against the production, lead and fueled by prominent pressure groups and individuals, among them Anthony Comstock’s Society for the Suppression of Vice, minister Dr. Newell Hills who denounced the “morally lax standards on display in Broadway plays,” and William Randolph Hearst who pressured authorities take action against a play he called “an insult to decent women and girls.” Would-be censors were especially upset over the passionate and romantic gesture that ends act 1: Jean sweeps Fanny into his arms and carries her upstairs to his awaiting
bedroom. Nethersole, however, believed the play “conveyed a significant moral lesson to audiences. She reasoned that a selfish, decadent woman who transformed herself into an exemplary wife and mother offered hope and inspiration.”

Certainly Sapho’s depiction of a sexually promiscuous, unapologetic woman charting her own way in the world offended conservative sensibilities and undermined the delicate moral code that dominated the previous century, one predicated on the domestication of female activity and the erasure of female desire. Moreover, as John H. Houchin has pointed out, “Sapho’s corrosive messages were the products of an unmarried, female artist who, in the opinion of her accusers, possessed no regard for public decency or morality.” So not only was the production itself an insult, but an unorthodox woman—a theatre actress—had thrust her own depraved agenda upon an unsuspecting and defenseless public. The show’s publicity corroborated this—featuring a picture of Nethersole as Fanny, it read “Olga Nethersole’s version of Sapho by Clyde Fitch,” with the actress-producer’s name above the title.

A successful, unmarried professional, Olga Nethersole represented the New Woman of the twentieth century, and Houchin quite rightly draws a line connecting the Sapho scandal to the play’s woman producer and star, noting that Nethersole’s status “provides the entire episode with a cultural resonance that transcends its importance as an isolated theatrical scandal.” The New Woman emerged in the later decades of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the conservative social and political milieu that strictly prescribed female behavior. The New Woman challenged gender paradigms and experimented with “new” ways of living as a woman in the world. She desired not only
professional opportunities but personal and sexual fulfillment. Generally, she was unmarried, defining herself by her rejection of traditional domestic roles and the stipulation that women’s biology was women’s destiny. She had ambitions and goals, and insisted on the intellectual, political, and cultural freedom to pursue her interests. She agitated for equality in employment and education. And, above all, she demanded the vote. In Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes that the New Woman was so “[c]ertain of her own abilities, she began to demand the vote, so as to implement her new social visions more effectively,” and thus she “politicized gender.”7 Whether these women claimed the label feminist, which not all did, women’s rights had become part of the national conversation and subjected the American mantra of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to a new, feminine scrutiny.

In her book Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism (2000), Susan A. Glenn argues that “[a]ssertive self-spectacle by theater women was of crucial importance for changing concepts of womanhood at the turn of the [twentieth] century,” and “[e]qually significant was the way theatrical producers made a spectacle of women, positioning them as passive objects of consumption.”8 This compound thesis speaks to the overlapping historical ambiguities and complexities of female performance and woman’s shifting role as subject and/or object therein. Glenn’s characterization of competing and perhaps irreconcilable gendered impulses illuminates the formative role the theatre played in staging female influence:

The result was a dynamic tension between women’s desire (on as well as off the stage) to use theatrical spectacle as a vehicle for achieving greater
voice in culture and politics, and theater’s countervailing urge to turn female spectacle into a symbolic expression of male mastery. It is in the interplay between active and passive female spectacle that we see most vividly how the theater became a progenitor of two very different, but nevertheless equally modern, concepts of femininity.

Within this spectacular interplay, Glenn argues that the actress emerged as a type of “proto-feminist figure,” as referenced in the chapter epigraph, creatively modeling for women their “right to sexual expressiveness and personality or self-development.” Although Glenn’s characterization seems only to include the actress as real woman performer, as a symbolic figure the actress’s proto-feminist potential could certainly also be evoked by the staging of her dramatic counterpart, the character of the actress. In fact, Christopher St. John’s The First Actress provides an excellent example of how women theatre artists and suffragists employed the actress figure as a form of direct political engagement. The play’s dramatic conceit of a ghostly lineage of actresses from theatre past enacts the kind of proto-feminist vanguard Glenn describes, linking the actress figure with progressivism and performing a spectacle of female creativity that actively claims the right of a public voice for women.

Journalist, actress, and playwright Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970) was herself a “prototype for the independent and adventuresome ‘New Woman’ of the early twentieth century,” as Barbara L. Bywaters has rightly noted. Treadwell’s journalism career took her to Europe as a war correspondent and later to Mexico, where an exclusive interview she conducted with revolutionary Pancho Villa inspired her play Gringo (1922). Treadwell was active in the suffrage movement and her writing reflects her concern with women’s issues. According to Bywaters, Treadwell belongs “to a group of early modern
American women writers who flourished in what Elaine Showalter has labeled ‘feminism’s awkward age.’”11 Indeed, after the early success of the women’s movement and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in 1920, the country experienced a return to the previous century’s political and social conservatism. This conservative backlash stalled the feminist agenda and this was reflected in feminist writing of the period. As Bywater puts it, “Although a number of theatrical works by women from 1910 to 1920 focused on women characters and feminist themes, by the late 1920s the figure of the independent, darling ‘New Woman’ who challenged the traditional roles for women had been subdued.”12

Treadwell’s *O Nightingale*, first drafted under the title *Loney Lee* during the summer of 1923 when Treadwell was actively studying acting and theatre in New York with Moscow Art Theatre luminary Richard Boleslavsky, is a romantic comedy in three acts. *O Nightingale* echoes with Treadwell’s passion for the theatre as well as her distrust of Broadway producers and general contempt for the commodification of artists. The play features two performing women, the actress and the dancer, the former at the beginning and the other at the end of her artistic life, characters that are animated both by Treadwell’s own loving devotion to her profession and the skepticism that it will ever satisfactory return her affections. It is a coming-of-age story of a young woman artist who must make her own mistakes. As she learns the hard way, ambition and talent are not enough for her to realize her goals. Treadwell’s exploration of disillusionment and dramatization of growing pains—female and artistic—in *O Nightingale* can be read as a
product “feminism’s awkward age,” a depiction of the slippage between political
idealism and practical application.

As an actress-play, *O Nightingale* represents a shift in the portrayal of the actress.
Aspiring ingénue Loney Lee, the titular nightingale, is a 16 year old, small-town girl
newly arrived in the Big Apple determined to make it on Broadway. Even as a white,
heterosexual, Christian woman, Loney does not quite fit the actress character type that
will come to dominate the American stage, represented in such plays as George Kaufman
and Edna Ferber’s *The Royal Family* (1927), George Kelly’s *Reflected Glory* (1936), and
Moss Hart’s *Light Up the Sky* (1948). In these later works the actress is a special type of
adult woman, who is all at once glamorous, sophisticated, established, successful,
independent, sexual, free, flamboyant, demanding, precious, temperamental, bigger-than-
life, confident, insecure, and beautiful; in short, a star. In *Light Up the Sky*, Hart describes
Irene as “exuding that ineffable essence of a great star of the stage” (28). And Ken
Ludwig’s description of Lily in his adaptation of *Twentieth Century* (2003), a period
piece set in 1933, uses the same shorthand: “stunning, histrionic, glamorous, egotistical
and totally magnetic. She’s used to being pampered, getting her own way and being told
that she’s the center of the universe. In short, she’s a star” (37). Treadwell’s Loney is far
from being a star. She is a simple, all-American girl trying to make it in a man’s world.

As an actress character Loney is a young sibling of the actress family; she is not
on par with the leading ladies who soon will command the stage, but neither does she
conform to nineteenth century ideas about the young actress. For instance, Dion
Boucicault’s melodrama *Grimaldi; or, Scenes in the Life of an Actress*, which premiered
at the National Theatre Cincinnati on 24 September 1855, tells the story Violet, a young orphan who is transformed by the love of an adoptive father into a celebrated actress. Although Grimaldi is called an “old clown” by the elite London circle represented in the play, he is no relation to the celebrated English pantomime clown. In fact, except for his ragged appearance, he is non-descript; and although he speaks in broken French, he is neither “an Italian nor Frenchman” but simply a hanger-on, a down-and-out bit player. Julia, the prima-donna to whom he appeals for a benefit performance, rebukes that he is a disgrace to the theatre profession. As a joke, Julia suggests Grimaldi get the beggar girl whose singing from the street can be heard through her dressing room window to play for his charity benefit, as she will not deign to use her talent for such an undeserving cause. When the beggar girl Violet is summoned to Julia’s room, Grimaldi’s heart instantly goes out to the orphaned child. Even though he is without means himself, Grimaldi agrees to adopt and cherish Violet as a gift from God, raising her as his daughter as the inheritor of his artistic legacy. The men in Julia’s circle, including the aristocrat Lord Arthur, fall in love with the innocent Violet and their pursuit of her complicates the plot, feeds a (one-sided) rivalry between the actresses, and puts the heroine’s life and virtue in requisite danger according to melodramatic conventions.

At the heart of the story, however, is the bond between Grimaldi and Violet that transcends the father/daughter relationship and affects one of creator/creation. Violet’s raw artistic talent is shaped and honed by Grimaldi. Within a year’s time he has successfully trained his adopted daughter to be the consummate performer—unknownst to her preparing her to perform—ironically—the role of Camille for a
charity benefit, which will not only secure their financial future but her future as a celebrated actress. Within this framework, Boucicault challenges theories of acting and prejudices against the theatre profession. Although Violet has been taught how to act love, she confesses she doesn’t actually know what love is, a riddle that only further emphasizes her virtue and feminine value. Grimaldi exploits this by explaining that she is so saintly she does not know what inspires her acting. Violet’s innocence is equated with her talent. And here is a dramatization of the angel/whore trope that privileges actress-as-angel. Julia, as the vindictive, plotting, jealous actress balances Violet’s incorruptibility. In the end, Julia is vexed by Violet’s theatrical success, but at a crucial juncture she joins forces with her younger rival to offer a passionate defense of the profession they share: “we cast aside all petty rivalry, and heart to heart we repel the aggression with derision and contempt.” Grimaldi certainly calls into question the idea of actress as male creation, an antitheatrical bias that denies women’s artistic agency.

While Grimaldi’s motives throughout the play are purposefully portrayed ambivalently to heighten dramatic tension, in the end he, like Violet, is revealed to be true and pure of heart. He trains Violet as an actress out of love, as his gift to her, his artistic legacy. He provides her with a craft, a means of supporting herself and maintaining financial independence. To some extent, Boucicault’s play anticipates the Svengali theme where a man wields powerful mental influence over a young woman to manipulate her into performing as desired. Interestingly, the American impresario David Belasco was a friend of Boucicault’s and was highly influenced by his work. Closely identified with the Svengali character, Belasco took female pupils and turned them into
celebrated actresses, carefully and strictly controlling their careers and public personas. 

Kim Marra’s Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914 (2006) examines the legacies of impresarios Augustin Daly, Charles Frohman, and David Belasco. As Marra demonstrates, these men shared a similar trajectory. Each came from an underprivileged, immigrant background and “sought upward mobility by turning a struggling or outcast Gentile woman into a luminous star.”14 Each secured an unprecedented degree of “managerial omnipotence” at a time when theatrical manager became its own occupation rather than an extension of the duties of actor or actress, and thus it both “gained executive power” and “became an increasingly male preserve.”15 The impresario/actress relationship perfectly exemplifies, as Glenn describes it, “theater’s countervailing urge to turn female spectacle into a symbolic expression of male mastery,” a strategy designed to frustrate any feminist impulse embedded in female performance. Marra argues that the impresario’s careful crafting of the entire theatrical experience, from script to souvenirs, positions the actress as just another detail of male achievement, effectively neutralizing the actress as a proto-feminist figure. “As the centerpiece of her impresario’s presentation,” writes Marra, “the star protégée embodied a luminous yet potentially volatile combination of feminine forces.”16 Their status as unmarried, successful professionals aligned these “star protégées” with the tenets of New Womanhood, at least in spirit if not in name. But a successful production demonstrated that the actress was just another theatrical element under male control—through their “presentation” of the actress impresarios “reassured audiences that the exhilarating but anxiety-producing New Woman could be simultaneously bridled and enjoyed.”17
This “Svengali mode of star making,” which “became a key theme of the era,” is part of the cultural and theatrical backdrop for Treadwell’s play about a struggling actress. While Loney’s naivety is a match for Violet’s innocence, Treadwell’s *O Nightingale* uses the actress character to interrogate this narrative of female artistic dependence rather than perpetuate it. Loney is not a passive vessel, but the source of her own talent. She is driven, earnest, and courageous, leaving the comforts of family and her Midwestern home to strike out on her own. Rather than having the fortune to be “discovered,” Loney must create her own opportunities. And, above all, it is her belief in women’s right to equal opportunity that sustains and fuels her journey. While *O Nightingale* diverges thematically from the conventional young actress protégée story, the play’s production also foregrounds women’s rather than men’s labor, representing an important shift in the theatre of women’s relationship to their profession. Playwriting in America in the nineteenth century was primarily a male domain, although I would argue that the actress-manager engaged in a form of writing by licensing and producing for their own theatres. Nethersole’s commission for an adaptation of *Sapho* can also be read as an early form of women’s writing in the theatre, even though the actress-manager did not actually author the words of the script. But *O Nightingale* is the work of a woman playwright. And when Treadwell found the regular road to Broadway closed to her, she undertook the play’s transfer herself. By writing, producing, and acting in her own play, Treadwell provided an early model for theatre woman to create and present their own work and tell their own stories.
Sophie Treadwell’s *O Nightingale*

Do you know what he’s been going for me?
He’s been grub staking me, putting up for me—all for nothing, just
because he believes in me! He’s done all this, just so I could get my
chance to do my Juliet!

-Loney Lee in Sophie Treadwell’s *O Nightingale*¹⁹

Appolonia Lee, Loney for short, is the idealistic and talented teen-aged actress
pursuing her dream of a career on the stage in Sophie Treadwell’s *O Nightingale*. Loney
pounds the New York City pavement but finds herself on the wrong side of closed-door
meetings, opportunities for work in the theatre completely beyond her reach. Nearly
penniless, Loney serendipitously makes the acquaintance of a wealthy, old-world French
marquis, who takes an “interest” in her abilities and her charming neck. Grateful and
dedicated to her new patron, Loney does not, however, completely understand the
compass of her new friendship. The play’s naïve pathos, which engenders much of its
comedy, pivots on the actress character, whose innocence, independence, and integrity
are celebrated as a rarity in a profession (and society) fueled by tit for tat compromises,
sexual and otherwise.

Notably, *O Nightingale* is one of only seven plays that Treadwell saw produced
on Broadway during her lifetime, and its New York production immediately precedes
that of the 1928 premiere of *Machinal*, the much anthologized expressionist drama that
solidified Treadwell’s reputation as a playwright, feminist, and modernist. When, much
to Treadwell’s dismay, producer George C. Tyler inexplicably decided not to bring the
play to Broadway after a successful out-of-town tryout with Helen Hayes as Loney Lee,
Treadwell secured the Broadway rights and in 1925 co-produced *O Nightingale* herself.
Under the pseudonym Constance Eliot she also acted the role of Loney’s mentor, the aging Russian prima ballerina Vera Istomina. The production was generally well-received, touted as an entertaining and charming springtime comedy, even transferring venues “Owing to the need for more seats.” Weak box office ultimately caused the production to close after a four-week run.

Notably, the press coverage emphasized Treadwell’s multifaceted involvement in the production. Critic Percy N. Stone called her Broadway’s only “playwright-producer-director-actress.” A profile piece in the New York Times echoes this in its characterization of Treadwell’s artistic mission, also characterizing Treadwell as a bit of a rebel: “Firmly opposed to the traditional practice of giving over a written play into the hands of managers with other interests and other ends to serve than the dramatist’s, Miss Treadwell has now put her conviction into practice in ‘O Nightingale,’ written, produced and, in part, acted by herself.” Perhaps to his credit, the unnamed writer was careful to make the distinction between understanding Treadwell’s unique involvement in the production as the work of a committed feminist versus merely categorizing it as an impulsive “feminine caprice.” As a theatre artist, Treadwell desired more creative autonomy than the current production model in which she worked allowed. She firmly believed that as the provider of story, plot, and dialogue, the playwright’s vision should be the guiding creative force driving production. In her Lab lectures, she advocated for the playwright as an active collaborator in the rehearsal process, and controversially argued for the playwright to be placed over the director in the artistic pecking order. During a time when Treadwell was actively studying acting and lecturing on playwriting
and theatre production, it seems appropriate that she would write a play about the theatre. It is easy to imagine that at this time Treadwell was as reflective about her relationship to her chosen profession as is her central aspiring actress character in *O Nightingale*.

While none of Treadwell’s plays are considered autobiographical per se, they are certainly populated by familiar characters and situations from Treadwell’s life. As Nancy Wynn has observed, “Personal experiences were always grist for [Treadwell’s] literary mill.”

*O Nightingale* even generated a little controversy with reports that the character Lawrence Gormont, an unflattering portrait of a fat-cat theatrical manager, was patterned after a real-life counterpart. Treadwell denied these rumors in the press, calling Gormont a product of her imagination, not a veiled public attack against a particular colleague. She defended herself and her characterization:

> I wish to take this opportunity to emphatically deny that the role of Lawrence Gormont, the theatrical manager in my play, “O Nightingale,” is, in any manner, a reflection on the personality of any one particular person associated with the New York stage. Since the play opened it has been called to my attention that rumors have been circulated to the effect that the character is a caricature of a prominent producer and manager. Such rumors are absolutely without any basis of truth. In creating the character of the theatrical manager I had no particular model in mind, and not by any stretch of the imagination can I see how Gormont can be cited as the prototype of any one particular manager or producer on Broadway.

To make her point, she goes on to comment that “It would be just as unreasonable to have it rumored that the character of Appolonia Lee, the little girl from Kansas with histrionic ambitions, played by Martha-Bryan Allen, was drawn from the life of any one particular actress.”

However, among the *O Nightingale* related clippings in one of Treadwell’s many scrapbooks housed in the University of Arizona Special Collections—and she was an
avid scrapbooker—there appears an undated article from the *New York American*, where Treadwell was employed as a reporter, titled “Miss Treadwell portrays Herself at 60 in New Play,” evidence that perhaps Treadwell’s imaginative leaps in *O Nightingale* were firmly based in a personal reality, and that she indeed had the life of one particular actress in mind as a template for Loney Lee: herself. Moreover, the article’s byline reads Sophie Treadwell, making Treadwell both subject of the article and its author. This piece of journalistic writing echoes the play’s metatheatricality and brings to bear Treadwell’s reputation as a respected journalist to her theatrical pursuits.

In this brief article, journalist Treadwell reports that playwright Treadwell’s answer to how she conceived of the character she herself acted, the role of Vera Istomina, former danseuse to the Czar, is simple: “that character is myself as I will be at sixty, just as the part of ‘Loney Lee’ . . . is myself when I was not quite sixteen.” While these comments could be taken as Treadwell engaging in a little showmanship for publicity’s sake—after all she was also co-producing the show—they also certainly, at the very least, encourage an autobiographical reading of the play. And in this sense a bit of showmanship is not altogether inappropriate, since here Treadwell refers to herself as the template for two performing women characters: Istomina the dancer and Loney the actress.

Treadwell’s first ambition was, in fact, to act. Her romance with the theatre, which may be characterized as a love/hate relationship, began when she was bitten by the acting bug as a child after being taken to the theatre to see the great Polish actress Helen Modjeska, who, many years later, would become a mentor to Treadwell. Her involvement
in drama clubs at UC Berkeley gave her some of her first experiences on the stage, where she received positive encouragement for both her abilities as a performer and author. After graduating college, she pursued an acting career in plays and in vaudeville with only very minor success, which prompted her to turn her focus more completely to playwriting; she hoped that with a pen as her instrument she would be better able to control her own professional destiny and make a place for herself in the theatre, as she had as a journalist. In one of her Lab lectures, she would also comment that playwriting gave her the opportunity to go deeper into the work than acting permitted: “In writing plays I wasn’t limited to just to parts,” she explained. Many critics referenced Treadwell’s acting background in their reviews of *O Nightingale* as a way to account for her casting herself as Istomina—in a “once a frustrated actress always a frustrated actress” manner. The character of Istomina was most likely inspired by Modjeska, and her performance of Istomina paid homage to her late mentor. Shortly before Modjeska’s death, the famous tragic actress hired Treadwell to type her memoirs. Modjeska encouraged Treadwell to be uncompromising about her work as a playwright in the name of artistic integrity. As Jerry Dickey has suggested, it is possible that Treadwell’s conflicts with producers and agents over her refusal to accommodate demands for script changes stemmed from this piece of advice; her “uncompromising” attitude likely prevented more of her plays being produced. That she had such a reputation probably also fueled the rumor that *O Nightingale*’s Gormont was indeed a caricature of a known Broadway producer.
In her *New York American* article, Treadwell goes on to explain the character of Istomina in personal terms: “The old premier danseuse, with her glory days behind her, now a penniless figure with a fierce pride, represents a point of view which is very much my own.” While she doesn’t elaborate on what this point of view is, Istomina’s mantra is “work!” “Talent is only the beginning!” she instructs, “work is all the rest!” “How else will you succeed!” (4); her speech is emphatic; her dialog punctuated by exclamation marks throughout. “Work” was also certainly Treadwell’s motto. Treadwell was a tireless worker, constantly writing, constantly rewriting, and constantly trying to market her writing. As a playwright, Treadwell was self-taught. She was also very self-critical. At the end of her life she reprimanded herself and called her writing corny. “I suddenly realized the devastating truth that I wasn’t a good writer,” she wrote in a letter. “I went back over everything I had done and saw that it was all no good.”

While Treadwell’s point of view may have given shape to Istomina’s character on the page, it was Treadwell herself—her person—in the role that gave Istomina a material presence on the stage, a corporeality that continued to impose the “real” on the fictive. Since Treadwell’s public reputation had been made as a writer and not as an experienced performer, this incongruity seemed to call special attention to her performance of Istomina’s trade, the performance of dance, as Istomina is seen instructing her two pupils in ballet. The “Treadwell Portrays Herself” article seemingly addresses her critics as to the legitimacy of both her performance and herself as a performer. She concludes the article by answering the unasked question of how a playwright came to realistically embody the physicality of a dancer character, writing: “As to the technique of ballet
instruction, which I represent on the stage, I learned it from a member of the Moscow Art Theatre Company during their visit in this country. I worked through an entire Summer with this Moscow Art Theatre player. The name, ‘Vera Istomina’ was actually the name of a court dancer who was famous in the Russia of before the war.”

At the time of O Nightingale’s production in 1925, Treadwell was 39 years of age, which meant that even though she was acting the role of the older, wiser, retired Istomina, she was really no further removed in age from Loney’s 16 years as she was from Madame Istomina’s 60 plus years, the future and the past equidistant. While naivety is Loney’s defining trait, she also possess Istomina’s “fierce pride” and no nonsense work ethic; she is driven, aware of her own talent, and determined to prove herself if only given the chance to shine—16 or not, the parallels to the ambitious Treadwell are clear. Although Treadwell positions Loney and Istomina as two sides of the same coin in terms of their artistic experience, the two characters do not necessarily represent two extremes of a single, inevitable continuum: the hard knock lessons of Istomina’s life are not a foregone conclusion for Loney, thus complicating the moral of the story.

The action of the play takes place in the studio apartment of aspiring sculptor Richard Warrington. Warrington is being pursued by Miss Watts, whose mother, a prominent socialite and headache elixir heiress, has recently married The Marquis de Severac, a marriage of convenience for the aging couple which bestowed fortune on his side and European pedigree on hers. Angling for some time with the workaholic Warrington, Miss Watts baits the hook with a prominent commission. Warrington is to sculpt her step-father, The Marquis, while accompanying the family on a two-week
yachting vacation. Warrington also rents his studio to dance instructor Madame Vera Istomina, former *première danseuse* of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg. Down to two unreliable pupils, the woman who once commanded royalty has fallen on hard times. Coincidently, she and Severac are former lovers. While allowing for Severac’s sophistication and exceptional taste, Istomina betrays his penchant for exaggeration and young, beautiful women to appease his vanity.

When Loney faints during dance class from hunger, her fellow student Dorothy (Dot) Norton helps revive her with nips from her flask and some sisterly advice. An actress herself, but no longer the new kid on the block, Dot tells Loney to “get a man, kid” imparting the sobering news that determination and hard work alone will never get a woman anywhere. A man seems to be an actress’s most important accessory: “You can’t make a move without one” (1.20), explains Dot matter-of-factly. This news is shocking to Loney, and upsets her belief system entirely: “And what of talent? What of character? It’s character that wins! AND talent! And faith? Faith is what does it! Why, it moves mountains! Sometimes something sweeps over me and I feel I could do anything. Conquer—the world!” (1.23).

When Severac arrives for his meeting with Worthington, Loney mistakes him for the studio’s owner who, according to Istomina, is looking to hire a woman to keep house for him. Loney, desperate for some small income lest she be forced to return home to Kansas, appeals to Severac for the job. Before Severac can correct her mistake, she rushes out to retrieve letters of reference for Severac’s approval which attest to her “respectability, perfectibility, and dependability.” In the meantime, Warrington returns
As Warrington and Severac settle the business of the commission before setting sail that evening, Loney arrives at the studio, her few possessions in tow. She has been evicted from her room for not paying the rent. Her situation now more desperate than ever, she implores Severac to allow her to stay at the studio and do the housework for her keep, to Warrington’s utter confusion.

After untangling the comic muddle of mistaken identity, Severac convinces the reluctant Warrington to let the “poor child” stay and work, as a favor to him, just until the men return from sea. Very impressed by the influence Severac seems to be able to exert, and on her behalf too, Loney inquires whether The Marquis knows any important theatre people, especially producer Lawrence Gormont, who Loney has not been able to meet despite afternoons spent skipping lunch waiting in his office for the opportunity. When Loney, testing Dot’s advice, innocently tells Severac she thinks he would be an ideal man for her, Severac accepts her invitation. He invents a business reason to stay behind from the family vacation, planning instead to spend time with Loney, grooming her for her introduction to New York society.

The following week, Severac arranges an elegant catered dinner at the studio for Loney with Gormont and Flora St. John, a popular actress under Gormont’s care. On the night of the dinner, Warrington returns home unexpectedly, interrupting preparations. The news that the whole sailing party has cut their trip short sends Severac speedily home to cover his tracks with his wife, leaving Warrington to find Loney in his bedroom, fresh from the bath. Oblivious to how illicit this scene appears to her employer, Loney’s only concern is her evening’s engagement: this is her one chance to impress the man who can
make her an actress, her “whole life depends on it” (2.29). Warrington, of course, believes he has been duped, that Loney has been using his apartment to entertain men, let alone carry on an affair with Severac. Loney’s frantic and ambiguous replies only reinforce his false perception of her as a swindler and “working girl.”

As Loney’s story becomes clearer, Warrington realizes he has misjudged her. An artist himself, he recognizes a kindred spirit, and becomes infatuated with her rare combination of unaffected optimism and determination. But Severac’s unexpected return forces Warrington’s exit. Unfortunately, the dinner is not the showcase for Loney it was meant to be. Becoming more and more unhinged by Gormont’s slick manner and his coarse banter with Flora St. John, as well as Severac’s awkward insistence that Gormont do something for Loney’s acting career, Loney’s charm and wit abandon her. Unable to contribute in any other way, she restricts her remarks to the weather, even making excuses to avoid presenting her audition piece for the producer. Running late for the theatre, Gormont and St. John make a hasty exit, leaving Severac to comfort a distraught Loney. Not only have her illusions of the “great art” of theatre been shattered by the reality of the business, but she also has failed to “justify” Severac. Loney believes that her end of the unspoken contract between the actress and her man necessitates that she justify his financial stake with credit for her success; but despite appearances she has not “landed pretty.” Without any means of repayment, she has defaulted on the terms: “But I never would have accepted it, if I hadn’t been just sure that I’d succeed—and that you’d get all the credit! That’s just how I was going to pay you back! By credit!” (3.29).
As Loney tries to muster the courage to overcome this setback, Severac unsympathetically informs her that she will never be a successful actress because she is not thick-skinned enough to persevere. He suggests she return home to people who can love and take care of her. But Loney has no one waiting for her, and the thought of giving up her dream is more frightening than pursuing it. Seizing the moment, Severac makes a cowardly exit from Loney’s life, not unexpected considering his “life long habit of avoiding scenes, and postponing difficult situations” (3.32). In the end it is Warrington who, having returned unnoticed and witnessed Severac’s inelegant departure, is there to soften the blow. Believing she is alone, Loney readies for bed, comforting herself by reciting Juliet, her favorite role in her considerable Shakespearean repertoire. Her manner so captivates Warrington he finds he is unable to withdraw as planned. He takes the trembling Loney in his arms and recites “Philomel with melody,” a lullaby from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, to help quiet her as her father used to do when she was a child. The play ends on a tenderly romantic note with a kiss.

Loney is timid and plucky, homely and winsome, demure and confident; “Under her commonplace, rather nondescript exterior there is quivering an ardent, gallant and wildly ambitious little soul” (1.12). Loney is, above all, the epitome of naïveté, a quality that makes her vulnerable and righteous. That Loney is an actress sets up certain expectations as to her morality and sexual availability, expectations which are at odds with Loney’s own temperament but reinforced by the actions of the play’s two other actress characters. Flapper Dot Norton’s strategy for success entails liaisons with successful men, although this approach has yet to yield the desired result. Famous actress
Flora St. John is a kept woman who cheerfully endures insults in exchange for leading roles on Broadway. It is not that Loney is uncomfortable with a sexual undertone; it is that she is completely deaf to it, and because of this she is ill-equipped for show business. Her attempt to subscribe to the gendered mechanisms that dictate feminine progress at the expense of faith in her own talent and character fails miserably. She speaks her own language, that of the poetry of the theatre, eloquently quoting Shakespearean verse when her own words do not seem to be enough. She is the titular nightingale, plain, small, and otherwise unremarkable except for the chaste beauty, strength, and forthrightness of her song.

The details of Loney’s life paint her as the underdog. She nursed her mother until her recent death, and her father’s drinking has landed him in jail. But Loney comes from hardy Midwestern stock, her small-town upbringing having instilled in her a can-do attitude and strong work ethic that sustain her on her quest for fame and fortune. She is driven not only by a love of her art, but also by a fierce belief in her natural right to pursue her heart’s happiness. The United States of America is a free country and its founding documents guarantee equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For Loney this means women have the “right to go on the stage if they want to, haven’t they? They’re American citizens. The constitution says so! All men are created equal for the pursuit of happiness! And that means women, too! We got the vote now! Free and equal! . . . I got a right to my chance, and I’m going to get it!” (1.23). The eager young actress’s feminism and outspokenness are in contrast with the woman she would emulate, Flora St. John, whose own voice is effectively hamstrung by Gormont’s administration of her.
Here perhaps Treadwell is suggesting that what empowers Loney and her fierce belief in her right to self-determination is part and parcel of the same tenacious activism and optimism that recently won the political victory for women’s suffrage.

As an actress, Loney has been raised on the classics by her father, a frustrated poet who “kept on reading Shakespeare to keep up heart,” even though, says Loney, “that seemed to fail him sometimes” (1.19). She acted in all the plays at school and received positive notices, which she took as confirmation of her talent. And she has, to her credit, already conquered the demanding role of Juliet, which she hopes to reprise to great acclaim on Broadway. Due to her mother’s illness, she was forced to pass on the offer to join a touring production that made its way through her home town, the “man’s” offer to take her with them additional confirmation of her abilities and an unfortunate missed opportunity that she does not want to repeat. Dot’s solution, though, is simple: “Grab off another one” (1.20), a man that is.

Dot is not quite Loney’s negative image, but her overt sexuality and urban manner highlight what Loney is not, at least not yet. Where Loney is inexperienced, yet enthusiastic and eager, still confident in her dreams, the more experienced Dot is slightly worse for wear, but still determined to project verve, part of keeping up appearances for an actress who claims to be twenty-two but is actually over thirty and long since an ingénue. Perhaps overcompensating for age and lack of success, Dot dresses “to allure” (sic); her whole existence “revolves entirely around the one quality of sex attractiveness. In that, for her, is pride, dignity, achievement” (1.10). Dot’s story overlaps with Loney’s in that she too left the small Midwestern town where she was born to become a rich and
famous New York City actress. Although she still calls herself an actress, she is currently looking to work in vaudeville as a dancer, an indication that she is already on the slippery slope of artistic (and personal) compromise. Recently, Dot has hitched her wagon to vaudevillian Harry Stringer, known as the Dancing Nut. “Up until now he’s always done a single,” explains Dot. “But he’s made me this offer. . . . You got to be good to double with Stringer” (1.17). When Dot reappears in the final act, the two are living together and Dot wears a new diamond ring, but the dancing engagement has not yet materialized because “There’s a guy in the booking office got it in for Harry—trying to do him dirt!” (3.3), says Dot, quick to assign blame.

The flask-carrying veteran Dot does know a thing or two and shares her brand of wisdom with the newcomer. Besides correcting Loney on the pronunciation of Flora St. John’s name, “You pronounce that SinJin if you want to be swell!”32 (1.22), she also disillusions Loney about how actresses achieve success. While Loney is convinced that hard work and talent will eventually pay off because “everything comes to him who waits!” Dot’s emphatic response, “He! I’ve waited!” (1.21) is meant to disabuse Loney of her idealistic notions by picking up on Loney’s unintended point that it is a man’s world. Men “rule the roost”: “You can’t make a move without one” (1.20), explains Dot, affecting a cool nonchalance. Loney may not want a man, but Dot makes it plain that her pretensions to independence will not serve her acting career:

LONEY. No—I want to make good by myself!
DOT. You’ll never do it!
LONEY. Other women have!
DOT. No! Never—it may look that way, but like most things that look—it ain’t. Some men—somewhere—somehow—sometime—boosted ’em!
(1.20-1)
Dot informs Loney that even Flora St. John, whom Loney offers up as an example of an actress who pulled herself up by her own bootstraps, so to speak, was less than a nobody, a biscuit shooter “tossing wheats,” before Gormont “discovered” her and put her on the stage. The move from kitchen ranch hand to star of a Broadway show certainly lends credence to the mythology that feminine progress in a man’s world requires a masculine “boost.”

According to Dot, it is inconsequential that Loney does not want a man; what is key to this arrangement is that the man wants her, at least “Enough to get you your chance, anyway. Then of course, it’s up to you. The best man on earth can’t make something out of a hunk of solid bone—though, come to think of it, it has been done, at that!” (1.20). When Loney asks, “But why does a good man WANT to make something out of—a bone?” Dot replies, “God knows! But they do. Like to prove they can pick ’em, I guess” (1.20). Dot’s characterization of the relationship between actress and her male patron brings up the question of reciprocity. What does the man receive in exchange for “making” the actress? There is a complex gendered subtext to this form of patronage only hinted at in Dot’s glossy account that directly implicates the actress and puts public bragging rights into a distinctly sexual context.

Treadwell’s concern in *O Nightingale* is the male-authored narrative and how it overdetermines female creativity and implicates the actress sexually. The theatre business is represented as a man’s domain, and the brash, money-minded womanizer Gormont its primary gatekeeper. By plucking Flora St. John out of obscurity and elevating the fortunes of a woman who, as we are led to believe, never harbored aspirations to go on
the stage, Gormont has proven he is an impresario extraordinaire, who possesses the
power to make a successful actress out of “a hunk of solid bone.” St. John appears to be
just the latest in a long line of actresses serving at Gormont’s pleasure. He is possessive
about her person, rudely commenting on her weight and commanding her to sit where he
can “keep an eye” on her. Further, he shows little true affection for her, his use of the
diminutive “sweetheart” betraying a “showbiz” inspired glibness rather than any romantic
inclination. He implies that her acting is “cheesy” and is clearly insulted when she asks
him to “listen like a gentleman” (3.24) to Loney’s audition: “Say you can’t teach me any
manners!” he retorts, smugly adding, “When I want to know how to brown the old
wheats or deal ’em from the elbow, I’ll come to you, see!” (3.25). Gormont is quick to
use St. John’s initiative against her, securing his position as her social superior. By
referencing her humble beginnings Gormont not only puts St. John in her place, he also
reminds his protégée that the actress only thrives by his hand, suggesting that just as
quickly and easily as she was made, she can be unmade: “There’s gratitude for you!
There’s the thanks I get for—” (3.25).

The climatic dinner party scene is a comic indictment of an uncaring theatre
profession. For Loney, it is an initiation by fire, an introduction to the sexual politics of
the theatre business that disadvantage women. As if to confirm what is already being
modeled by his liaison with Flora St. John, Gormont reveals that talent has little bearing
on success, that actresses are dispensed by “type.” He can judge Loney’s height just by
looking at her, boasting “I never miss it!” And his professional assessment of her is
facile: “Nice little gal—nice little figure—make up nice—the next part I have that’s your
type—you can come down and read it” (3.21). When pressed for a vehicle for Loney, Gormont is uninterested in committing to a new girl: “I’ll let you know—Maybe in a couple of months if I decide to [do] the ‘Foolish Virgin’—Flor here’s doing pretty well by the old man—just now!” (3.21). That Flora St. John is doing “pretty well” by Gormont is proof positive that he really “can pick ’em” and that the relationship is indeed mutually beneficial, financially and otherwise—their familiar manner attests to their sexual intimacy. St. John satisfies (for now) all of his requirements for a profitable partnership: “Not too fat, eh! Just about right! Only I got to keep after her all the time—” (3.27). And she is not too intelligent, Gormont admitting to preferring stupid actresses because they are much easier to “handle” than talented ones: “Well I’d rather have ’em dumb” (3.28). Gormont’s hyperawareness about St. John’s weight masquerades as due diligence on the part of an investor concerning his investment but is in actuality an expression of a more insidious mechanism of patriarchal control. As an actress, St. John does not need to know anything, not even the name of the playwright—Gormont amusing himself at her expense when she refers to Ibsen as Gibson. The actress’s dramatic performance relies not on ambition, talent, or intellect, but on the presentation of a manufactured physicality which is in itself the product of a male-authored fantasy.

From the moment Dot instructs Loney as to the benefits of “a man! And a boost!” (1.21), there is a mounting tension concerned with how Loney will navigate this risky business and whether she will become the victim of trade-offs made for the sake of furthering her career. When Gormont hypothetically casts Loney in the “Foolish Virgin,” it is a metatheatrical moment wherein his stereotyping of her also pigeonholes the current
play’s comic denominator. Foolishly, she is oblivious to the sexual implications of the
type of actress-and-her-man relationship that Dot advocates, Gormont engages in, and
she herself solicits from Severac. Like the foolish virgins of the biblical parable, Loney
has been caught unprepared, and her lack of preparation will keep her from succeeding
where others, like Flora St. John, have. Her sheltered upbringing and sexual purity serve
as protective layers insulating her not only from the sexual innuendo associated with the
masculine boost, but also from benefiting materially from it. Even Loney’s choice of man
betrays her naiveté.

When Severac boasts that he knows many important theatre managers and
producers, Loney sees a man who can pave her way. The Marquis de Severac is “a
distinguished little Frenchman about sixty-five” (1.23). His thick grey hair, French-
accented English, and impeccable taste in clothes affect a European sophistication and
gaiety, but his eyes betray weariness and his hands his true age. Thanks to his recent
marriage, he is impressively wealthy, and Loney marvels at the money he spends on
expensive dresses and dinners on her behalf: “You always protest when I say I couldn’t
have picked me a better man—but I mean it. Why, I couldn’t make a move till I got you!
And now look at me!” (2.9). Loney’s attempt to repay Severac’s attention to her by
crediting him, which she does eagerly and often, only draws exasperated sighs from the
gentleman. Loney frustrates any sexual subtext in her relationship with Severac, not out
of a calculated coyness but out of a genuine innocence. Severac’s suggestion that they
breakfast together is met by Loney’s entirely platonic enthusiasm: “Why, I’ll eat
breakfast with you—if you want. How early do you have it?” (2.5). Comically, Severac
takes out his growing frustration and annoyance with Loney’s sexual impassivity on the waiter who is serving their catered dinner, throwing his weight around by barking orders in French and micromanaging the event.

Under Severac’s guidance Loney becomes a little more *distinguée* every day; in his words she is “delicious.” Loney may be delicious, but she is a dish that is not to be enjoyed, at least in not in any way that would satisfy carnal desires. As a sexual predator, though, Severac proves to be harmless. He allows himself to feel flattered by Loney’s attention, chaste as it may be, but in the end realizes that he is beyond the philandering days of his youth. Ultimately, he is also ineffectual as Loney’s male boost. Although he is acquainted with Broadway’s who’s who, he is a consumer not a producer of culture, and his outsider status only reinforces hers. Severac may know the theatre but he does not understand show business; further, he disdains the American form of capitalism that indoctrinates “even the little girls!” (3.32) with impossible dreams of success: “You make love to a woman—she talks you success! And Business! My God! My God!” (2.13).

As the stereotypical “good girl” Loney’s artless manner is seemingly at odds with her chosen profession. Her disposition is truly angelic, her talent pure; and although she is the comical “foolish virgin,” her sexuality, or lack thereof, prevents her commodification in the male economy of desire, but also, tellingly, restricts her access to “success” in the theatre profession. Her forward progress may be thwarted by sexist ideologies that subordinate women to the men who continue to rule the roost, but Loney is a free woman in a free country. Above all, she is an actress, and her artistic imagination knows no bounds. Treadwell underscores this point by lacing Loney’s dialogue with
Shakespearean verse, breaking down the masculine frame by making Loney the mouthpiece for the words of the most revered playwright in the Western tradition. Accordingly, Loney’s proficiency with Shakespeare is not gender or genre specific; she embodies Prospero, Slender, and Orlando just as easily and naturally as Isabella and Lady Macbeth. But it is Juliet that she has been preparing her whole life to play, a character that gives full expression to her youthful passion and faith.

While Treadwell foregrounds the art of theatre through Loney, it is the art of sculpture that provides the play’s over-arching metaphor. The sculpting of women is a motif in *O Nightingale*; it resonates with the impresario/actress dynamic that murmurs in the background, a professional protocol which proves to be a non-starter for Loney. All of the action of the play takes place in a sculpting studio, doubling as Richard Warrington’s apartment. The aspiring sculptor has been secretly sculpting Istomina, inspired by her strong face, beautiful line, and grace. While Warrington works with traditional clay, Gormont’s medium is bone. He creates actresses out of mere women to specifications that satisfy both the theatre-going public and his own personal taste for a female companion. And Severac steps in to transform Loney, using his money to smooth out her rough, small-town edges, constructing a woman out of a girl. Severac’s interest in serving as Loney’s benefactor also betrays a pretension to impresario status, in the manner of an old-world artistic patronage. When Severac abandons Loney, after having failed both to turn her into a proper mistress and to “boost” her career, Warrington, the only real artist among the men, comes to Loney’s rescue.
In the play’s final scene, Loney’s rendition of Juliet captures Warrington’s heart. He has fallen in love with her talent and integrity. *O Nightingale* may be populated with theatre people, but Loney and Warrington are the only true artists, and appropriately they find each other. It is the only man-woman relationship where parties are on equal terms. In the play’s final moments, Warrington comforts a crying Loney with a recitation of her favorite poem Philomel, or the nightingale, and the curtain comes down on a kiss. More than one scholar has found this ending problematic, reading the happy ending as confirmation that Loney’s real quest is for a father figure rather than a stage career. However, I suggest that this ending need not be read as an either/or. This romantic pairing does not necessarily mean that Loney has given up her acting career for love—in other words, Istomina’s sacrifices are not Loney’s fate. This is the beginning of Loney’s journey; and while no one said it would be easy, why can’t she have both love and an artistic life? After all, it’s a free country. By avoiding Severac’s trap, she has proven she will never be the kept women or the object of a Pygmalion narrative. She is the titular nightingale and her voice cannot be silenced or molded to specifications. In her first appearance in the play, she performs an exuberant dance of freedom and joy during which she crashes into Warrington’s secret sculpture of Istomina, sending the work-in-progress crashing to the floor. This disfigurement of the clay model is certainly symbolic of Loney’s independent spirit, and her refusal to be conscripted into a scenario that is not of her making.

In *O Nightingale* Treadwell celebrates the “beautiful mysterious lady whose name is Theatre” (3.20) and goes for laughs at the expense of producers who believe it is their
job to rewrite the playwright’s play. Despite the play’s light-hearted nature, Treadwell
does not shy away from critiquing the systems of representation that subject women’s
voices and bodies to male control. The play argues and performs women’s self-
expression, positioning the actress character as a site of possibility and self-
determination.
Endnotes


3 Sova 244.


5 Houchin 41.

6 Houchin 55.


8 Glenn 3. Italics in original.

9 Glenn 3.


11 Bywaters 98.

12 Bywaters 99.

13 Dion Bourcicault, *Grimaldi; or, The Life of an Actress* (New York: Samuel French, 1864) 34.


15 Marra xiv.

16 Marra xix.

17 Marra xx.

18 Marra xv.
Sophie Treadwell, *O Nightingale*, ts., Box 8 Folder 3, Sophie Treadwell Papers MS124, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, AZ. 3 Nov. 2010. Act 2, page 38. All subsequent references from the play are from this typescript and will be given as parenthetical citations formatted as (act.page).

My 2010 trip to the University of Arizona Special Collections was made possible by the Coca-Cola Critical Difference for Women Graduate Studies Grant for Research on Women, Gender and Gender Equity.


See Ozieblo and Dickey 134.


“O Nightingate Characterizations,” Box 12 (Scrapbook 9) Sophie Treadwell Papers MS318, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, AZ. 3 Nov. 2010.

Sophie Treadwell, “Miss Treadwell Portrays Herself at 60 in New Play,” *New York American*. Box 12 (Scrapbook 9) Sophie Treadwell Papers MS318, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, AZ. 3 Nov. 2010.

Qtd. in Wynn 85, from *The Playwright as Actor*.


Sophie Treadwell, “Miss Treadwell Portrays Herself at 60 in New Play,” *New York American*. Box 12 (Scrapbook 9) Sophie Treadwell Papers MS318, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, AZ. 3 Nov. 2010.

“Miss Treadwell Portrays Herself at 60 in New Play.” MS318, Box 12 (Scrapbook 9).

Dickey notes that “In performance, the play hinges on the ability of an actress to capture the innocence of Loney,” and goes on to give a brief overview of critics who found the character’s extreme naïveté cloying and unbelievable. See Ozieblo and Dickey 135.
While there is no indication that Treadwell’s Flora St. John is meant to (ironically) reference playwright and activist Christopher St. John (Christabel Marshall), it is difficult to not make the association simply based on their shared usual and easy to mispronounce surname.
CONCLUSION

For women, questions of subjectivity, truth, and identity may be not outmoded fictions but concepts which still possess an important strategic relevance. . . . Feminism does not so much negate reason as engage in more diversified forms of discursive argumentation and critique which can take into account previously repressed aspects of personal and social life—emotion, desire, the body, personal relations—and which can remain receptive to the specificity of female experience and the need for cultural and group identity.

-Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*

In 1749, David Garrick produced and acted in *Irene* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. A neoclassical tragedy, *Irene* has the distinction of being the only play of Samuel Johnson’s extensive oeuvre. Johnson, who has been called “arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history,” was a frequent backstage visitor in the playhouse but eventually decided to deny himself “this amusement, from considerations of rigid virtue.” As Johnson explained to Garrick, who was his former pupil and by this time was the foremost actor and theatre practitioner of the age, “I’ll no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities.” John Harold Wilson relates this anecdote to make the point that even “the great Doctor Samuel Johnson was not immune” to the allure of the actress.
While Johnson’s asceticism is not surprising, that Johnson’s comment refers to the actress in a backstage setting is notable, a reminder that the actress’s powers of attraction exceed the theatrical frame.

The fascination with the actress has always been twofold, concerned not only with her professional charge of the performance of character but preoccupied also with her (backstage) private self. When we acknowledge that, as Gilli Bush-Bailey writes, “[t]he actress’s body is the canvas/paper on which she creates, her use of movement, gesture and voice the colours she uses to demonstrate her skills,” it is easy to understand how much more difficult it is to separate the actress from her work. Furthermore, the intense scrutiny of her physicality and character is part of the legacy of how, in the actress’s absence, female was reduced to a theatrical “sign called ‘woman.’” Indeed, well-established theatrical conventions that charged men with the performance of female characters long precluded women performers and definitively prevented women from participating aesthetically in their own representation. The theatrical construction of female masked woman’s physical absence by substituting a conceptual presence that was itself imbued with the social and cultural prejudices that worked to exclude women from the profession, conferring upon men the power of cultural creation. With the advent of the actress in the Restoration, the performance of the female gender for the first time in the English-speaking theatre fell to women—absence was exchanged for presence, the invisible became visible, and the signified embodied. Once onstage symbols of woman, silk stockings and other fetishized garments were now clothing the genuine female form. The display of creamy white breasts, one of many markers of femininity that, historically,
in the absence of the female performer, had been counterfeited on the English stage, were now authenticatable.

The embodied presence of woman adds yet another layer of performance to the dramatization of gender, which combined with the tendency to conflate the acting woman with the theatrical identities she constructs and embodies on the stage positions the actress as a necessarily metatheatrical presence in the theatre. This is, indeed, part of the appeal of both the actress and actress character. Through an examination of plays that stage the actress, I have taken up a largely overlooked area of study and endeavored to demonstrate how the actress character interrogates and brings to light issues of gender and identity. While I have engaged in extensive literary analysis, I have done so with the premise that the actress character always exceeds the page, necessarily pointing to its real-life counterpart, and thus carries with it the material considerations of performance: staging the actress character requires the body and imagination of an actress of the day. This actress doubling enacts a metadrama that magnifies female experience and subjectivity, circulating a mode of feminism that self-consciously critiques the construction of female identity through the creative act of performance. This underlying feminist double consciousness is at the heart De Angelis’s dramaturgy in *Playhouse Creatures* as well as lays the groundwork for Simpson and Treadwell’s critiques of the marginalization of actresses.

**Staging the actress today**

-Thomas in *Venus in Fur*\

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Because, when I watch Vera act, I’m watching a young woman, an artist, grappling with representations of self. Who am I? Who am I?—
-Afua in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*

This dissertation comes at a time when there appears to be a surge of interest in drama that examines its own, and a heightened awareness of the lack of gender parity in the theatre profession. In 2009, the Manhattan Theatre Club’s Broadway revival of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber’s 1927 comedy *The Royal Family*, a satire inspired by the famous American acting family Barrymore, cast British actress Rosemary Harris as Fanny, matriarch of the famous acting family Cavendish, grandmother to Gwen and mother to Julie, a role Harris played in the 1975 Broadway revival that was later filmed. In one sense, the casting asked the 82 year old Harris to reprise her 1975 role as Julie, her presence ghosting her decades’ earlier appearance in the play as a successful, energetic actress at the height of her career. In his *New York Times* review, Ben Brantley notes that the 1975 revival is “a fondly remembered Broadway production” and that Harris’s history with the show “adds another layer of sentiment,” encouraging an intertheatrical reading of the current production. “But even those who know nothing of [Harris’s] history may find themselves moved to tears,” continues Brantley. “What is happening is a blurring of illusion and bone-deep conviction that is peculiar to live theater, as two actresses playing actresses spin hokum into moonlight, just as their characters are said to do.” Throughout, Brantley highlights not only the magic of theatre but the divine power of the actress. Of Jan Maxwell’s performance of Julie Cavendish, Brantley writes: “Like Fanny, this Julie turns the hackneyed notion of ‘theater in the blood’ into biological fact. Both women are wonderful paradoxes, people for whom
artifice is truly natural, and as mother and daughter they communicate in a perfect private language to which we are allowed privileged access.” Brantley poetically calls forth the theatrical genealogy of the actress that is being performed not only by the play’s depiction of three generations of (actress-)mother-(actress-)daughter relationships but through the “biological fact” of Harris and Maxwell, who are themselves related by theatrical blood.

*The Royal Family* is a play about genealogy and carrying on a theatrical dynasty. Any feeling of loss at Fanny’s death in the play’s final moments is tempered by her grandchild’s Gwen’s return to the family business (which she walked away from for marriage and motherhood) as well as the induction of the next generation into the family’s profession: it has been decided that Gwen’s infant son will make his stage debut appearing briefly with his mother in her new play—after all he’s got to start sometime. *The Royal Family* recognizes women as the carriers of the (theatrical) bloodline, and each generation of Cavendish actresses must negotiate cultural expectations that ironically put an acting career at odds with the priorities of family. Moreover, the metatheatrical shadow cast by Fanny’s also death also points directly to actress Rosemary Harris’s real-life artistic legacy, including Harris’s American-born daughter Jennifer Ehle, who followed her mother into the profession and has become an internationally celebrated theatre and film actress in her own right.

Not only do plays featuring the actress character continue to be revived, the actress continues to be of interest to contemporary playwrights. Two very recent plays David Ives’s *Venus in Fur* (2010) and Lynn Nottage’s *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011) both investigate the question of the actress. In *Venus in Fur* “playwright-slash-
director” Thomas Novachek has come to the end of a long and frustrating day auditioning actresses for the role of Vanda von Dunayev in his new play *Venus in Fur*, which he has adapted from the 1870 German erotic novella of the same name by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch that explores the themes of dominance and submission. Thomas gripes that none of the thirty-five actresses he saw came close to having “the stuff.” “And what ever happened to femininity?” he complains on the phone to his fiancée. “Young women can’t even play feminine these days. Half are dressed like hookers, half like dykes. I’d be a better Vanda than most of these girls, all I’d have to do is put on a dress and a pair of nylons” (4). Thomas’s hubristic declaration in the play’s opening moments portends the method of his undoing. Unfortunately for the first-time director his Vanda von Dunayev is much more woman than any actress seems capable of understanding: “There are no women like this” (3) he says flat-out.

When Vanda Jordan barges in, she seems to confirm Thomas’s worst fears about the want of professionalism of today’s actresses. But once the audition begins, Vanda instantaneously transforms into her namesake Dunayev, giving a stellar performance that either reveals a prodigious talent or perhaps hides a more dangerous truth. As Thomas reads the part of Severin Kushemski opposite Vanda’s Dunayev, he also undergoes his own transformation—first from playwright-director to actor, and then from actor to the character Kushemski himself, the man who wishes to be subjugated by the woman he loves—each step masterfully and surreptitiously orchestrated by Vanda. As the couple gets deeper into the script, the line between theatre and reality begins to disintegrate. Suddenly Thomas finds himself in the woman’s role, collared, leashed, and wearing the
fetishized fur of Dunayev. Vanda has completely turned the tables on Thomas, who realizes only too late that he was never the director in the room. Done with games, Vanda puts an abrupt stop to the audition: “Any way you cut it, any way you play this, it’s degrading to women. It’s an insult. It’s pornography” (73). It becomes frighteningly clear to Thomas that Vanda is not what she seems. Her rage is palpable: “How dare you. How DARE you! You thought you could dupe some poor, willing, idiot actress and bend her to your program, didn’t you. Create your own little female Frankenstein monster. You thought that you could use me to insult me?” (73, italics in original). The last moments of the play depict Vanda’s final transformation into goddess and Thomas’s complete defeat: “And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman’s hands” (74) declares Vanda, using the play’s words against the playwright. Thomas’s final words are a desperate supplication: “HAIL, APHRODITE!” (74). The playwright-director has scripted his own downfall in the fashion of high Greek tragedy meets “S&M porn” (11), as Vanda has branded the script. Like Dionysus’ destruction of Pentheus for insolence, Thomas’s degradation of women calls forth the wrath of Venus herself.

While Ives’s Venus in Fur entertains the terrifying possibility that behind the actress hides a vengeful goddess, Lynn Nottage’s By the Way, Meet Vera Stark pays tribute to the forgotten African American actress pioneers of Hollywood, women who struggled to piece together an acting career playing the only parts permitted them in the 1930s, slaves and maids. Between auditions, Vera Stark makes her living as a maid to twenty-eight year old Gloria Mitchell, a white Hollywood starlet. Vera is Gloria’s long-time employee and companion, and the play opens with Vera helping Gloria rehearse
Marie, the tragic octoroon brothel mistress in the antebellum story *The Belle of New Orleans*, a part that every actress in Los Angeles is vying for. Vera also has her sights set on a part in this project, that of Tilly, Marie’s maid, casting which would replicate on screen the women’s real-life relationship. When Gloria entertains the film’s director, the famous Maximillian Von Oster, in her home, Vera and her friend Lottie, who has been hired as extra help for the event, take the opportunity to “audition” for the “real Negroes” Von Oster wants to cast as plantation slaves. As Von Oster carries on about authenticity—“no, I don’t want actors, I vant people. Negros who have felt the burden of hard unmerciful labor. I vant to see hundred years of oppression in the hunch of their shoulders (46)—Vera and Lottie morph into the stereotypical slave characters he imagines, bowing and scraping, and putting on the dialect and bent posture of the plantation. Both women give amazing, pitch-perfect performances. Their “audition” enacts a comic metadrama that burlesques these outmoded caricatures that romanticize the subjugation of plantation life. It is an extremely funny scene, especially because, despite their best efforts, their audition goes unnoticed by Von Oster who only sees “truth” in the “tragic story” of her life that Vera improvises to great comic effect: “My mama died in child birth cuz there wasn’t no doctor to birth me proper” (47). Von Oster delights in her display, priding himself on the purity of his artistic vision: “Authenticity,” he says. “Just as Anna Marie conjures the flavors of Carnival in Brazil. This broken Negro woman, her sad mournful face, the coarse rhythm of her language tells the story of the South” (48). But the joke is on him. Anna Marie, the date he has brought with him this evening, is not the exotic Brazilian she claims to be and he believes she is. She is a
black actress, light-skinned enough to pass for something else more acceptable, who is also Vera and Lottie’s roommate. While all of the actresses in the room, including Gloria, are putting on a performance in one way or another, the great director Von Oster only sees what he wants to see. The truth of the black experience remains invisible to the cultural creators.

In the second act Nottage stages her own critical and academic intervention into African American history and women performers. The scenes move fluidly between the present moment of 2003 where an academic colloquium on Vera Stark’s influence on the film industry is taking place and two recorded pieces of history. The first is the actual black and white film *The Belle of New Orleans* in which Vera made her mark as an actress in the 1930s, and the second is rare video footage of a 1973 interview with Vera on a popular talk-show. The juxtaposition of these three levels of “reality” places various images of the black actress side by side, allowing them to comment on each other both figuratively and literally, from various perspectives as taken up by the cultural critics and academics of that make up the “Rediscovering Vera Stark, the Legacy of *The Belle of New Orleans*” panel of experts, as well as by Vera herself through the interview which reunites Vera with her costar from *Belle* Gloria Mitchell and asks both actresses actress to comment directly on their past.

By making visible the experience of black actresses in America, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* makes history in much the same way that De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* revisions history through its feminist critique of the Restoration theatre. Contemporary playwrights Nottage and De Angelis use the metatheatrical device of the actress character
to recover women’s history and critique our present moment in the process. The personal is undeniably political in plays like *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, *Playhouse Creatures*, *O Nightingale*, and St. John’s *The First Actress* that stage the actress character as a means to question the roles women are allowed to play both on and off the stage. While a play like *Venus in Fur* asks the question “who is the actress” rather than “what can she be,” seeking to locate and understand her “real” identity, a concern which echoes the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with neutralizing the actress threat and diagnosing female virtue.

**The actress question**

[W]omen in theatre still are not controlling the means of their own production or the discourse that characterizes their work.  
-Jill Dolan, “Making a Spectacle, Making a Difference”

This lack of voice in women—or the sound of a voice without significance, without effect—is a rule whose exception is the actress. . . .  
-Kerry Powell, *Women in Victorian Theatre*

In a forum essay for a special issue of *Theatre Journal* in December 2010 on contemporary women playwrights, April De Angelis wrote “we need to look at each play text in terms of the gender trouble it proposes. . . . Reading a play in text or performance through the lens of gender is in itself a subversive gesture in a critical culture that fails miserably to do so.” Situating the actress character as a critical lens does this critical work, promoting a subversive reading of gender in performance. Theatrical representations of actresses necessarily engage with cultural perceptions of actresses, which historically have been paradoxical at best. The actress question and its theatrical
negotiation illuminate the larger woman question, critically highlighting acceptable, if
contradictory and derogatory, formulations of female identity. To ignore the richness that
this lens offers to the analysis of drama and performance is to discount how these popular
entertainments and depictions continue to reflect and shape our cultural understanding of
the actress. Staging the actress has long served as a defense for this historically
marginalized professional woman, so that even in drama that seemingly espouses
conservative ideologies, the act of staging the actress claims a public space for women’s
issues and selves that can be read as a subtext of resistance. The actress character
represents a new and rich approach to history, women, and performance that underscores
as well as enacts the importance of female self-expression and self-determination amid
constantly evolving public images of women.
Endnotes


5 Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 64. See Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8) for a discussion of Ferris’s theory of the “sign” of woman and theatre history.

6 David Ives, *Venus in Fur* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2011) 54. I saw this play when the Manhattan Theatre Club produced it on Broadway on 2 May 2012 at the Lyceum Theatre. All subsequent references from the play are from this publication and will be given as parenthetical citations.

7 Lynn Nottage, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013) 90. I saw the Goodman Theatre production of the play in Chicago on 2 June 2013. All subsequent references from the play are from this publication and will be given as parenthetical citations.

8 For instance, recent studies about (the lack of) gender parity in the theatre profession have spawned initiatives like “50/50 in 2020,” a grassroots movement to “acknowledge the contribution of women to theatre and to achieve employment parity for women theatre artists by the 100th anniversary of American suffrage in 2020” (http://5050in2020.org/about/ accessed 11 Sept. 2011).

9 For this performance Rosemary Harris won the 1976 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actress in a Play and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play. She was nominated for the Tony again in 2010 for playing Fanny.


11 Maiden Phoenix Theatre Company, a new Boston fringe company, committed to having at least 51% female involvement in all aspects of production, announced that their first full production will be April De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* this August 2014. (They are producing the Old Vic, eight-character version of the script.) In 2012, the Southwark Playhouse in London premiered an Anglicized and contemporized adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* by
Anya Reiss. The University of Missouri included Maria Irene Fornes’s *The Summer in Gossensass* in their 2013-14 season. And The Ohio State University is producing Alice Childress’s *Trouble in Mind* in 2014-15, which was recently revived to critical acclaim in 2011 at Arena Stage in Washington, DC.

12 On the first page of the script, the word *white* in Nottage’s character description of Gloria Mitchell appears in quotation marks, a tip to readers whose significance is not necessarily understood in the play’s performance until much later.


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Premiered 2009. Set in the Restoration, the story follows a day in the life of Aphra Behn, who has the opportunity to become the first female playwright and get out of the spy trade for good if only she can find the time between interruptions to finish her play by the morning deadline. The parade of drop-in guests include King Charles II, her current lover; actress Nell Gwynne, her new infatuation; and spy William Scot, a former lover who may have vital information on a plot to assassinate the king. Behn plays match-maker passing on her keeper to a very grateful Gwynne while also trying to get to the bottom of Scot’s motivations. Gwynne takes no offense when Charles assumes she’s a whore, coming on to her even while she is dressed like a boy. The two turn out to be a perfect (kinky) match, and Gwynne dubs the king her Charles the Third. Duffy stipulates that all the parts except for Behn are to be doubled by one actor and one actress; also offering that the part of Lady Davenant is an opportunity for crossed gender casting.


Premiered n.d. The publication notes that this play is arranged from Charles Reade’s story “Art: A Dramatic Tale.” The play is set in London, 1706, and Anne Oldfield, famous actress at Drury Lane Theatre, is approached by Nathan Oldworthy, lawyer and distraught father. It seems that his son Alexander is completely infatuated with Mrs. Oldfield, to the point where he refuses his father’s wishes to pursue the law as a profession, and to marry a rich heiress. Instead, Alexander has been writing poetry and sending it to Oldfield, his actress muse. Oldfield assures Oldworthy that she can disabuse his son of his so-called love for her; and she does so by putting on a command performance of extreme ordinariness, masterfully bursting the illusion of the ideal woman that she has perfected for the stage. She meets Alexander still wearing bed clothes and curling papers; uses snuff; displays poor manners; and speaks roughly. She is so transformed from her stage persona that Alexander does not even recognize her at first. As it turns out, Alexander has written a tragedy that shows real promise. And when the “real” Anne Oldfield the actress reappears in the character of the queen from Alexander’s play, her recitation of Alexander’s verse breathes such life into the drama that not even Alexander’s skeptical father can deny his son’s talent for playwriting. However, now that the ruse has been given up Oldworthy fears his son will fall back in love with the actress. But Oldfield’s explanation puts his fears to rest: Alexander was never in love with her; his interest was in the actress, a muse that helped usher forth the artist in the man: “A
poet loves his own work first. He is dreaming of the laurel for his own brow. I was but the inspiration. It was the actress not the woman he thought of” (22).


Premiered 2000. A poetic, one-act play about Valeska, a character inspired by Valeska Gert, a notable German avant-garde cabaret artist, dancer, and actress of stage and film. Set in 1956, Valeska’s monologue is delivered from a bare stage in a small New York City basement nightclub. Occasionally, her performance is interrupted by hypnotic episodes, which she claims she can self-induce but which she sometimes cannot successfully fend off. During these periods of altered consciousness as well as at other points in the play, Valeska is accompanied by the performance of a contortionist. Song and dance punctuate Valeska’s storytelling which is part free-association, part oral history, and part critical self-assessment of her life as a woman and actress. She considers how her unwillingness to repackage herself into a more mainstream and pleasing performer kept her from true career success and popularity.


Premiered 2010. Hollywood actor Beau Bridges and his daughter Emily adapted and starred in this one-act play based on the 1933 novel by Richard Boleslavsky of the same name. Real life father and daughter take the stage and address the audience as “actor” and “actress,” introduce themselves, and share personal some personal history before they take on the roles of “The Teacher” and “The Creature” respectively. From here they play multiple parts as needed through a series of ten scenes that dramatize the professional progress of a young actress as she learns and masters the “six lessons” of her craft from a dedicated acting teacher who becomes her life guru. Beau Bridges comes from an acting family, and the play is dedicated to both his parents, an homage to the passing down of wisdom from generation to generation—as it happens, Lloyd Bridges gave his son Beau a copy of Boleslavsky’s book when he first expressed a desire to take up his father’s profession, and now Beau honors the tradition by adapting Boleslavsky’s narratives and staging this play with his actress-daughter.


Premiered 1999. Outrageous hijinks abound in this campy melodrama set in 1967 that revolves around the secrets and antics of Angela Sussman, a beautiful but aging songstress who is trapped in an acrimonious and unhappy marriage and hoping to make a professional comeback. Even though her Hollywood movie mogul husband Sol Sussman has proof of her affair with a young actor, he refuses to grant her a divorce. Instead, he declares, “I’m sentencing you to life imprisonment, baby and I’ll be the warden” (19) and that his happiness will be in denying hers. After Sol’s unexpected death, Angela’s suspicious daughter enlists the help of her flamboyant brother to discover the truth. The two slip LSD into Angela’s tea, and while tripping on acid Angela confesses to killing Sol with a poisoned suppository. But Angela reveals an even bigger truth, that she is actually her twin sister Barbara. Angela and Barbara performed as children in a sister
singing act, but when RCA wanted to sign her as a solo performer, Angela quit the act and went on to become famous, “America’s Nightingale” (56). After Barbara’s life spins out of control—her husband and child die in a car accident—she decides to take over her sister’s (seemingly) perfect life, a life Angela does not seems to appreciate. She murders Angela with an overdose of drugs. Turns out Angela only thought she killed Sol. Actually Sol faked his death, and he returns to confront his wife’s killer: “You killed your sister. How could you ever think that you could replace her? As a wife perhaps, as a mother but as a star?” (63). In the end, all decide to accept Barbara as Angela, embracing her as wife, mother, and star: “Of course, you’re Angela. No one could have pulled off such a masquerade” (66).


Premiered 2011. Set in her apartment in the East Thirties in Manhattan, this play revolves around Olive Fisher, a working character actress in her 70s known as the Sausage Lady from her stint in the now classic “Gimme the Sausage” commercial campaign of the 1980s. She is a testy old woman who finds fault with everyone and everything, though she insists she has “never picked a fight with anyone in my entire life” (11). Her (perhaps only) friend Wendy, who feels responsible for Olive and regularly looks in on her, tries to broker a peace with her next door neighbors Robert and Trey, a gay couple. A Passover Seder hosted by Olive temporarily unites the group. But it is the ghost that appears in Olive’s living room mirror that suggests these individually are more deeply connected than they realize. It turns out that the ghost, Howard, was Wendy’s bother, and was intimately connected to each of them, if only briefly, before he died. While each must decide for themselves what this cosmic sign means, Olive takes this opportunity to reach out and reenter the world, taking the chance that it’s never too late to change one’s life or even find love, but not without a keen appreciation of the absurdity of it all.


Premiered 1991. Busch creates an off-the-wall world that comically critiques the witch hunts aimed at rooting out communists in Hollywood during the 1950s. The play is set in 1951, and Busch, playing in drag, originated the role of Mary Dale, the perfect wife and a very respected and wholesome Hollywood star. Through a series of coincidences and some intrepid investigative work on her end, Mary discovers that she is surrounded by communists! Secret Soviet identities are revealed, blackmail (even murder) plots are unraveled, and an FBI sting operation is exposed. It turns out that the Yetta Felson Acting School is actually a front for Communist Party recruitment, part of an FBI sting operation. Busch takes the opportunity to dig at American theatre’s fascination with Stanislavsky’s system when Mary criticizes Miss Felson: “Well, Miss Felson, without even mentioning your communist activities, I think you’re doing American actors a dreadful disservice encouraging them to wallow in self-indulgence and disregarding every tenet of discipline and professionalism” (91). After being drugged, Mary comically forgets who she is, fumbling with her various names, trying to decipher the roles she plays from who she is, including reminding herself that Mary Dale is a stage name, not
her real identity. In the end, Mary humbly testifies in front of HUAC, and the nice lady who grew up on a farm in Indiana names names, believing she is doing her duty to uphold American values without really comprehending the gravity of the situation.


Premiered 2006. Valium-popping Lucy is a Hollywood actress of mixed race (Irish mother and Bolivian father) who in a fit of frustration quits her TV show (and maybe her boyfriend) and returns to Bolivia seeking the comfort of her grandmother Pacha’s cooking and care. Her profession has brought no honor to her Bolivian family, the Santiagos who not only trace their lineage back to the Viceroy of Toledo, but boast three presidents and the youngest UN ambassador, Lucy’s deceased father. More than once Pacha calls Lucy a whore, makes reference to her fake breasts, and refers to her TV show *Beach Detectives* as “Whores on the Beach.” Lucy is not necessarily insulted by this branding; in fact, she quit her show after being costumed in one too many bikinis, fed up that producers use any excuse to sexually exploit her character, Hunter Nevins, a Ph.D in forensic psychology with a photographic memory. Cusi parodies Lucy’s Hollywood struggle with inadequate wardrobe when Lucy is stripped down to her lingerie and temporarily held prisoner in her own family home, which also facilitates a flashback to Lucy and her boyfriend Tommy experimenting with BDSM role play in a failed attempt to spice up their relationship. Role play becomes central to the play when Lucy wakes up as Hunter Nevins and uses her superior powers of deductive reasoning in order to solve a family mystery involving death, mistaken identity, and a secret room with hidden treasure. Through a journey of discovery where she confronts her personal demons, Lucy becomes the instrument through which the past is remembered and a conquered indigenous people’s history preserved, a new ambassador of Bolivia.


Premiered n.d. A play by Professor Jack Crawford of Yale University. Like a scholarly essay, Crawford has included endnotes to reference his play’s source material. Additionally, this publication contains a complete bibliography of the work that informed his play, including academic studies, correspondence, and memoirs from players who were colleagues of Woffington and Garrick. Setting the play in 1741, “the Woffington woman’s” reputation is already well-established at Drury Lane. Both times she appears in character, she is cross-dressed for breeches parts for which she was known, once drawing her sword against her benefactor Sir Charles when she catches him kissing the hand of a rival actress. “You are behind the scenes now, my lovely Peggy,—and Sir Harry Wildair is but a woman after all” (26), he says sarcastically, reminding her that the masculine authority she performs is a theatrical illusion. When David Garrick arrives at Drury Lane, few, except Peg who vows to help him, believe in his talent, as Garrick’s “natural” style of acting goes against the fashionable “tragic sing-song” (49) of the day. Immediately, Garrick professes his love and proposes marriage, but Peg is reluctant to be caged. Once, however, Garrick’s career begins to surpass her own, Peg seeks the emotional security of marriage. But before the couple can wed, Sir Charles reappears demands Peg return to
him, using old love letters to blackmail her, a plot twist that leads to a farcical turn involving a game of keep away from Garrick of letters, other love tokens, and male disguises. However, Sir Charles succeeds in planting the seeds of jealousy and breaking the pair up. When Peg continues to resist his proposals, Sir Charles arranges to punish her by getting the audience to hiss her at her next performance to “teach her pride a lesson” (144). Peg dies onstage, collapsing while performing the epilogue of *As You Like It*.

De Angelis, April. *Jumpy*. London: Faber, 2011. Premiered 2011. The story of Hilary, a middle-aged wife and mother trying to maintain a civil relationship with her only child, a teen-aged daughter who becomes pregnant while studying for her A-level exams. Hilary’s best friend is Frances, an actress who is currently working on perfecting a burlesque routine. New to the art form, Frances finds it to be an empowering public statement on female sexuality that also highlights female artistic autonomy, a seeming reversal of her view of sexual attractiveness as a fallback position. Later in the play, Frances uses performance as therapy for Hilary, dressing her in a burlesque costume and teaching her some moves. “Performing is a powerful place to be” (61), says Frances. But Hilary feels foolish instead of sexually empowered, too worried that she has hit menopause and will soon be sexually dried up and more self-loathing. For Hilary, the burlesque performance “feels like a step back” (63) instead of a rediscovery of the feminist ideals of her youth.

*Playhouse Creatures*. New York, Samuel French, 1994. Premiered 1993. Inspired by historical characters and incidents, this all-woman play tells the story of the first English actresses of the King’s Company in the 1670s. The episodic plot weaves scenes of the actresses in a backstage setting, talking, gossiping, and going about their personal business, with scenes of the actresses onstage in character, performing the parts that make up their careers and the season’s reparatory. The play is set in a perpetual present represented by a haunted theatre, and the actresses’ story is told as a flashback. Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the play.

Dietz, Steven. *The Nina Variations*. New York: Dramatists, 2003. Premiered 1996. Dietz reimagines and presents 42 variations (scenes) of the final meeting between would-be couple Treplev and Nina, the young writer and actress, from Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. While most scenes contain up to 2 pages of dialogue, some scenes consist of no more than one exchange between the two characters, and still others feature only one of the characters in monologue. Nina and Treplev refer often to the play by the lake that began both their careers, and its existentialism provides a haunted backdrop for their reflections on missed opportunities in careers and in love as they try to come to terms with their present moment. The play is quite self-reflexive: at one point Treplev holds a copy of *The Seagull*, informing the audience of its story. The two also frequently refer to the dead seagull and discuss the play’s symbolism. True to the original, Nina still holds onto the hope that she will one day be a famous actress.
Premiered 1977. Set in 1935, a group of eight college friends reunite at Fefu’s house in New England to rehearse a presentation raising awareness and funds for primary school education. In addition to being an educator, Emma Blake is an actress. Her part of the presentation is a dramatic reading from the prologue of Emma Sheridan Fry’s “The Science of Educational Dramatics,” which she delivers impressively with “interpretive gestures and movements that cover the stage area” (46). In Part Two, in response to Fefu’s admission that she is in constant pain, which she characterizes as more spiritual than physical or emotional, Emma, left alone onstage, constructs an effigy of Fefu and recites a Shakespearean sonnet. The performance is a moment of spiritual uplift, a symbolic empowering of Fefu to not only persevere but overcome the nightmare and distortion she describes as characterizing her life. Fornes suggests that the act of performance itself is transformative and spiritual. Emma says “Life is theatre. Theatre is life. If we’re showing what life is, can be, we must do theatre” and that acting is “springing forth with the powers of the spirit” (22). Fornes dictates that the four scenes in Part Two are to be played simultaneously and repeated four times so that the four groups of audience rotate through each setting—the lawn, the study, the bedroom, and the kitchen. The multiple iterations further underscore the ritual of performance and highlight Emma’s staging of performance within the play proper as a ritualistic site of empowerment and transformation.  
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Premiered 1998. Set in London 1891, the play is based on historical figures American actresses Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea and dramatizes their real-life quest to produce the first English-language production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. Already great admirers of Ibsen’s writing, Fornes portrays the actresses’ fascination with the character Hedda, as they come to know her and piece together her disposition and desires from their copious research on Ibsen, critical reviews of foreign productions, and, finally, from bits of stolen *Hedda Gabler* script. They thirst for the creative acting challenge of playing an interesting and psychologically complex character like Hedda, a dramatic role that completely breaks with conventional, melodramatic depictions of women of the era. Fornes stages the actresses engaged in the work of the actor: research, script and character analysis, and actual rehearsal of scenes. She ends the play with a flash forward to Robins giving a speech on the transformative experience of playing in Ibsen, as she came to be known as a producer and actress of Ibsen’s work. The speech is taken from a talk Robins actually gave to the Royal Society of Arts in 1928 that was subsequently published in the book *Ibsen and the Actress*.  

Premiered 2001. Set in the winter of 1870, saloon and theatre proprietress Madame Fanny Dubeau, a French expatriate relocated to San Diego, California, hatches a plan to keep her business open after getting stiffed by her last lodgers, a theatre troupe called the Pageant Players. She intercepts a letter meant for the Players that contains a
cash advance and contract engaging them to travel to British Colombia to perform the
week of Christmas, the balance due of $500 to be paid at the end of the week. Fanny
recruits the Reverend Teller, Joe Mackey, and her protégée Marta Reddy to pose as the
Pageant Players and travel north to Barkerville, BC to collect the payment. Now 22 years
old and 7 months pregnant, Marta is a former child star, trained by Fanny who purchased
the German-born girl after she was brought to the New World by a boss hurdy.
The former lovers, Marta and Mackey marry, and the rag-tag group set out on their journey,
rehearsing their repertoire on the way. Their Christmas Eve pageant is a mash up of
Shakespeare, The Last of the Mohicans, A Christmas Carol, and the gospels, with Marta
basically giving birth to her son onstage. Fanny fears that the disaster of a show will force
her to reveal the deception, but it turns out the troupe is a hit with the locals, starved as
the Cariboo is for entertainment: “Thank God for artistic deprivation” (90), jokes the
Reverend, who has decided to give up preaching for actor’s monologues, celebrating the
moment by planting a passionate kiss on a surprised but very pleased Fanny.

Premiered 1996. Set in Paris in the 1970s, the play revolves around Marlene
Dietrich, legendary star of the screen and stage, now in her 70s, as she embarks on a one-
woman show where she performs iconic songs from her career.

Premiered 2006. The story of British actress Beatrice Stella Tanner who became
known by her married and stage name Mrs. Patrick Campbell. The action begins at a
swank Hollywood party where Mrs. Pat, quite admired but still an outsider in the film
industry, is entertaining a young starlet and a young actor who serve as her escorts. From
here we move into a series of moments from Mrs. Pat’s life, constructed more as a
pastiche than a linear narrative and plot. Structurally, the play seems to move around
Mrs. Pat; that is, she doesn’t move in and out of scenes as much as the scenes and
characters come to her as around a fixed point in time and space. Each of the additional
five cast members plays multiple parts. Gems gives us the highlights of Mrs. Pat’s
biography, including brief encounters between the actress and theatre luminaries like
Pinero (her role of Paula Tanqueray is a touchstone throughout the play), Forbes-
Robinson, John Gielgud, and Sarah Bernhardt, spending the most time on the Mrs. Pat’s
complicated relationship with George Bernard Shaw. Mrs. Pat advocates for the actress
as an artist, a creative collaborator in the theatre, and requests her “fair share” (65) from
Shaw for their work together. But Shaw keeps her from publishing their correspondence,
staking the claim of the writer over the written word regardless of the source of its
inspiration. Mrs. Pat muses that her favorite roles are the ones she has yet to play.

Premiered 2007. In this 10 minute play set on a park bench, an older woman
befriends and comforts a young actress who has just been fired from playing Juliet,
distracting her with name-dropping, quoting famous movie one-liners, and general stories
of her own past life as a working actress. The older woman puts forth her own longevity,
career and otherwise, as a testament to perseverance. When they part, the young actress is
eager to face her next audition and to keep the faith, if at first one doesn’t succeed….  
“You go, girl, that’s the spirit!” (47), commends the older woman. Turns out, the older
woman, Thelma, has invented this past for herself, and on brief unauthorized sojourns
from the nursing home which is almost certainly her place of residence, she strikes up
conversations with young women in the park. Today she got lucky—“Finally got yourself
an actress” (48) comments Harry who comes to escort her home; with her performance
today, she got to inspire another actress to continue to pursue her craft.


Premiered 2000. Amanda, a famous Hollywood actress now middle-aged, returns
home to Buffalo, New York to star in Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, hoping that
this turn on the boards in the local theatre will reignite her fading career. There are ironic
parallels between Amanda’s homecoming and Chekhov’s story. Notably, Amanda’s
grandmother’s house is up for sale, a sign of the changing times in Buffalo. And like her
character Madame Ranevskaya, Amanda is broke. Although she just wants to be treated
like one of the ensemble, Amanda’s privileged Hollywood ways invariably clash with the
culture of the theatre to comic effect—Amanda is quite shocked to learn that a popular
local black actor will be playing her brother: “What do you call this, in the theater? When
you mix up the races? (21). Her return to Buffalo also inspires Dan, an old beau, to make
an appearance, and their reunion brings up tender feelings and the confession that
Amanda had an abortion while in boarding school. All the while, Amanda’s agent has
been brokering a deal to get her a recurring role on a sitcom and has finally gotten the
terms enticing enough that Amanda wants to fly back to LA to take a meeting with the
suits. With this television opportunity, Amanda believes she can make enough money to
buy and fix up her grandmother’s house so that she can be bi-coastal, work in the theatre
at least once a season, and give her grandson the same small town experience she had
growing up a Buffalo gal. Even though Amanda swears she will honor her commitment
to the show, the production team knows that they have seen the last of their star.


Premiered 2010. In 1948, Peter leaves college for a weekend to travel down to
New York to see legendary stage actress Katherine Cornell perform the title role in
*Antony and Cleopatra*, and afterwards he has arranged to meet Cornell in person. Cornell
agrees to the meeting because as a Buffalo native she cannot resist the opportunity to
spend time with a fellow Buffalonian. The play opens with the very brief and
professional meeting between the star and her young fan, where Peter gets Cornell’s
autograph. Afterwards, Peter tells us that all throughout the encounter he “kept thinking
that maybe, sometime, it might grow into a play” (7). The rest of Gurney’s two-act play
is an alternate version of Peter’s meeting with Cornell, the “play” that Peter imagines his
real-life meeting with the actress would inspire. In this extended version, Cornell invites
Peter to critique the show: she frets that the more she plays Cleopatra the more she feels
wrong for the part: “I’m not Cleopatra, Peter” (25). “Oh, it’s a terrible thing to be trapped
in the wrong role. I don’t mean just on stage. I mean offstage too. I don’t like who I am,
Peter. I don’t like what I’ve become” (25). Known for acting in “grand manner,” Cornell recognizes that the genteel days of the theatre are coming to an end, that the future lies with playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller but that she will be left behind when the theatre moves in this new direction. Also in this version, Cornell’s husband Guthrie McClintic, who directs most of her shows, hits on Peter. But Cornell will have none of it, and makes McClintic give Peter up, in the process revealing that hers is a marriage of convenience between a lesbian and a homosexual. In the end, Peter confesses that he made up the story about his girlfriend in order to appear more interesting; Cornell is impressed and hints that he might find a future as a playwright. Cornell uses Cleopatra’s death scene to bid Peter goodbye in the grand manner. And the play concludes with Peter’s direct address to the audience, “OK, I made lots of that up, but some of it is true. And I still have this signed souvenir program to prove it. And whenever I get down about the future of the theatre, I take it out, and look at it, and it cheers me up” (56).


Premiered 1997. This four-act play spans 1979 to 1995 and chronicles the relationships between Amy, her mother Esme (a well-known London stage actress), and Amy’s partner Dominic. It is Amy’s view that everyone should get on, and that love given unconditionally “will one day be rewarded” (121). But from their first meeting, Esme does not like Dominic, an emotionally volatile and not always likable aspiring filmmaker and art critic who believes theatre is a dead art form. Though Amy seems to be aware of the pitfalls of their relationship, she firmly believes that he is the one for her. Her unplanned pregnancy perhaps seals the deal. Esme, forty-nine when the plays begins, struggles with growing older in her profession and watching her daughter in a difficult relationship. She has lived the gender disparity of the theatre—“There are no parts for women” (15) is a common complaint. With long stints of unemployment she wonders how she can continue to call herself an actress, even if she feels like an actress: “How can I say I’m an actress when the point is I no longer act?” (55). When Esme is bankrupted by a high risk investment, she must take a job in TV, a medium she has no respect for or interest in; on the other hand, Dominic calls TV the medium of the people and accuses Esme of snobbery. After Amy’s death, Dominic tries to assist Esme financially, perhaps out of guilt because after all of this loss he has somehow come out on top. There is deep hurt and blame enough to go around here. The play presents the clash of personalities and ideologies created by the ever evolving web of family. Notably, Judi Dench originated the role of Esme Allen.


Premiered 1930. George and May, a New York vaudeville team, find themselves headed to Hollywood after their manager Jerry sells their act and comes up with the brilliant idea of breaking into pictures. Now that the talking picture has been invented, Jerry sees an opportunity: they will open a school for elocution and teach silent film starts how to speak for the movies. When they get to Los Angeles a big producer confirms that
they have hit on a moneymaking scheme when he complains about the waste of money his biggest star has become—a woman with the most beautiful legs in America: “And in the old days she was worth it! Every time she undressed in a picture it was sure fire! … But you can’t hear ’em!” (47). May runs the elocution school, coaching actresses and charging the studio big bucks for her expertise. George and Jerry also go Hollywood. George juggles a love affair with an aspiring starlet and by happenstance becomes an acclaimed movie director, even though he is the slow one of the trio and really has no idea how to make a movie. But in a Forrest Gump-like fashion everything he touches turns to gold, and thus they all live happily ever after.


Premiered 1900. The play opens backstage at the King’s Theatre in the middle of the first performance of John Dryden’s Conquest of Granada. Nell Gwyn risks missing her cue and ruining the show while the king is in attendance in order to come to the aid of the orange girl, who is being teased by Buckingham. The action of the play revolves around the pursuit of Nell by multiple suitors, including actor Charles Hart, the Duke of Buckingham, and King Charles. Nell tests the king’s love for her by badmouthing herself while disguised as a man. Thanks to her stint as her male alter-ego “Sir Adair,” Nell foils the Duchess of Portsmouth’s plot to pass forged papers that would embroil England in an international incident.


Premiered 1934. The plot revolves around Karen and Martha, who run a school for girls and are ruined after one of their students accuses them of being in a homosexual relationship. Martha has taken in her spinster aunt Lily Mortar, a stage actress, who gives the students elocution lessons to earn her keep. But Aunt Lily does not particularly have the temperament for working with children, and after some coaxing Lily announces her intention to return to the stage. Her absence becomes a problem when in Act III Lily ignores a summons to appear in court to testify on behalf of her niece in the libel suit the teachers have brought in an attempt to dispel rumors of their lesbianism and reestablish their reputations. When Lily returns too late, after the court has found against Karen and Martha, her excuse is that she had a moral obligation to the theatre and couldn’t leave her touring show, even for a court summons. The case against the teachers was based on a comment Lily had made about Martha having unnatural feelings for Karen, which was overheard by a student. Throughout the play, Lily is a mouthpiece of traditional values, reinforcing conventional notions of femininity, emphasizing what is proper breeding for girls as well as defining natural relations between the sexes.


Premiered 1828. Horton’s author’s note begins with a defense of Nell Gwynn’s character: “Although this Lady was mistress to a King, she was an amiable and worthy
character; humane, charitable, and condescending; and the single circumstance, that Chelsea Hospital owes its foundation to her, will stamp the true value of her memory, on the heart of every lover of his country” (5). And this is how Horton portrays her in the play. The plot centers on Leander, a soldier, who finds himself in Hereford, Nell Gwynne’s home town, after fleeing the scene of a duel over the honor of Nell Gwynne, whom Leander knows to be a true and good soul: “I know her worth, and future generations shall acknowledge it; within her bosom beats a heart, would grace the noblest of our British dames” (26, italic in original). Leander believes he has killed his opponent, Montague, who is also his commanding officer for using an epithet against “my generous patroness” (28) that Leander will not even dare repeat. It turns out Montague is alive, and he goes to the king to admit that he was the instigator and obtain a pardon for Leander for desertion. Charles grants Leander a pardon, and it is revealed he has pardoned his own son, the child he had with Catharine Peg whom he thought had died as an infant. This truth is revealed by Nell, who is Leander’s “generous patroness” and has long fostered him. The play ends with Nell kneeling before the king and asking the favor, which Charles has already promised to grant—that he establishes a hospital at Chelsea for the poor and disabled soldiers. “Though thou art not a Queen, thou’rt worthy of a place within a Monarch’s heart” (68). Throughout the play Nell recites Shakespeare, which underscores her empathy and lends the actress an air of authority and refinement.


Premiered 2010. Playwright-director Thomas holds auditions for his new play, an adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s nineteenth century erotic novel *Venus in Fur*, a story of a male submissive’s relationship with his mistress, only after a long day of readings, not one actress has impressed. On cue, enter a frenzied Vanda, a dizzy, insecure, foul-mouthed ingénue, who convinces Thomas to let her audition even though she might not actually be on his schedule. Coincidently, she also happens to have the same name as the character in the novel. With the help of a bag full of costumes and other accouterments which she has brought for the occasion, Vanda effortlessly transforms in plain view into the perfect embodiment of Thomas’s character Vanda Dunayev, to his thrill, delight, and eventual terror. As the director and actress read together the play’s fiction begins to overtake reality, and dominate and submissive role-playing games subvert male-female power dynamics. The play ends with the question of Vanda’s true identity: is she an actress performing a part, is she the embodiment of Vanda, or is she the goddess of love herself?


Premiered n.d. An author’s note says that since a small group of friends seemed to enjoy the work, he has decided to publish the play and offer it to a wider audience. The play takes place at Peckham, where Charles II used to spend time and attend the theatre. Sir Oliver Luke has arrived with a personal petition for the king; meanwhile, Nell Gwyn has sworn to help her friend actress Ann Killigrew get settled. Since the king has not yet arrived, Nell sees an opportunity to play Cupid and to secure Sir Oliver for Ann. Nell
tells Oliver that if he would like to ensure the king grant his request, he should make a show of loyalty to the crown. Nell suggests that he marry a lady of the court, and that she has the perfect lady in mind. Since Oliver wants to get the king’s approval for the union, Nell gets Rochester to play the king. Charles happens to arrive in the middle of Oliver meeting his stand-in, and Nell quickly fills him in on the ruse. In the third and final act, Oliver and Ann get married, Nell confesses to the plot, and the real king, Charles, grants Oliver’s petition. This little Peckham frolic has concluded to everyone’s satisfaction and delight. Nell the actress plays the part of Cupid, but more importantly she is the author of this entire plot.


Premiered 1833. The story weaves together many of the historical anecdotes that highlight Nell Gwyn’s professional and personal triumphs. Notably, Jerrold’s plot incorporates the story about Tom Nokes, a favorite actor of the Restoration, who brought down the house when he appeared onstage at the Duke’s Theatre in a wide-brimmed hat, saving a bad play in the process. Not to be outdone, John Dryden took this one step further, putting Nell Gwyn in a hat with a brim the circumference of a cart-wheel to speak the prologue to his Conquest of Granada. It is said that it was Nell’s charming performance given from underneath this ridiculous hat by which she first caught the king’s, her future lover’s, attention. In Jerrold’s play, the actor-manager Charles Hart of the King’s Theatre plucks Nell from obscurity, choosing her for to speak Dryden’s new prologue after he sees how well the orange girl’s wit charms the king. Nell does not realize she is conversing with the king, and innocently relates a dream she had where she gamely confronts the king telling him he ought to be as ashamed to let his soldiers “carry about their scars as witnesses of their king’s forgetfulness” (28), in fact confronting the king in the process. Later, Nell devises a plot where she literally rescues Charles and Berkeley, when the king and his courtier get locked up by a tavern-keeper because they are unable to pay their bill. The last moment of the play Nell recites Dryden’s prologue, costumed in the “broad-brimmed hat and waist belt” (47). She stumbles in the middle of her recitation when she finally recognizes the identity of the king watching from the royal box, and finishes the prologue in her own words, a plea to her audience to see the good in people.


Premiered 1960. Using Shaw and Mrs. Pat’s actual correspondence as source material, letters which were found in a hatbox under Mrs. Campbell’s bed after she died in 1940, Kilty depicts the trajectory of GBS and Mrs. Campbell’s sometimes loving sometimes contentious relationship using their own words. The two-character play opens with the characters “Actress” and “Actor,” who then, onstage, adopt their historical personas and begin to document their lives and their feelings for each other in a series of letters that spanned decades. The first act builds up to 1914, when the writer directed the actress in his play Pygmalion. Breaking with the convention of the characters not
Premiered 2002. An off-beat story set in 1986 about a slightly dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship where both mother and daughter find a new lease on life after their domesticity is upended by the arrival of missionaries who work with the hopeless. Yvonne’s life revolves around caring for her dependent mother Jean, a former Hollywood film star, known for playing the “other woman.” When Jean is not reenacting scenes from her old movies, she is terrified by the thought that Yvonne is wasting her life as her caregiver, that she is missing out on love. Everything changes when they answer an ad from Selma who seeks information about Jean. Only to amuse themselves Jean and Yvonne pretend that Jean is not Jean, that as film buffs they only “know” about the actress. Selma proves to be obsessed with Jean’s work, to the point that she wants to be Jean. When Selma mentions Brother Harmon, her partner at the shelter, Jean sees an opportunity. As it turns out Brother Harmon is looking for love. He sincerely falls for Yvonne, and as Yvonne begins to embrace a new life with Harmon, Selma takes her place as Jean’s caregiver, giving Selma the perfect opportunity to learn to play Jean. However, in the end, a concern about telling the truth prompts both women to decide to be responsible for playing themselves.

Premiered 2004. A two-act comedy about a twenty-something New York couple trying to break into show business. Steve and his girlfriend Melinda have high hopes when they get cast in a showcase production of *I Married a Communist*, the highly anticipated new play written by their acting teacher Bernardo, a Russian guru who is not exactly who he claims to be. After the showcase Bernardo breaks the bittersweet news: the show is transferring to Broadway and the new producers love Melinda but not Steve, calling him too young and sweet for the part of Roy Cohn. Bernardo is replacing Steve with another one of his students, Nicky, who is a bit older and rougher around the edges. With the successful Broadway run of the show, Melinda’s star is on the rise, putting a strain on her relationship with Steve; though this seems to be due more to Melinda’s self-centeredness—“This is my time. Mine.” (69)—than Steve’s jealousy. Now that Melinda is “up” rather than “down” she has less need of Steve’s support, but claims to still have a
great affection for him. When Melinda breaks up with Steve and moves in with Bernardo, a heartbroken Steve takes to the airwaves (he works part time at a radio station) to decry Women’s Lib and call for Men’s Liberation. In the end, Steve’s on air rant has earned him his own radio show. After months with no contact, Melinda returns to tell Steve that Bernardo has been exposed as a fraud and that it was Nicky who had orchestrated his ouster from the play—putting to rest the nagging idea that Steve was not talented enough. The question of the couple’s reconciliation is left up in the air—has Melinda learned her lesson that plays will come and go but there’s only one Steve?


Premiered 2003. This is an adaptation of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s play *Twentieth Century*, based on a play by Charles Bruce Milholland, which was originally produced on Broadway in 1934. Ludwig trimmed the original cast of 28 to 10, and he estimates that he kept half of Hecht and MacArthur’s dialogue. Set in 1933, the action of the play takes place on board the Twentieth Century Limited, a train bound for New York from Chicago. Producer Oscar Jaffe is on the verge of bankruptcy. His only hope is to get Lily Garland, “the biggest draw in the country” (29) and his former protégée and lover, to star in his next production. But Jaffe’s plight does not move Lily, who would rather drop dead than do another Jaffe show: “Now go back and tell that fake Svengali that I wouldn’t wipe my feet on him if he was starving” (42). Through a series of zany coincidences, Jaffe comes up an idea for the next big Broadway hit, an adaptation of the Oberammergau Passion Play, and a new investor worth millions. By dangling the part of “the greatest woman of all time” Mary Magdalene, “The wonton prostitute saved by Jesus Christ himself” (63), he convinces Lily to sign a contract with him, but the play’s backer, a religious fanatic, does not want a professional actress to contaminate the Passion Play—Magdalene is not one of his favorite characters. When the millionaire backer turns out to be a lunatic escaped from an asylum, all seems lost for Jaffe. But Max Jacobs has secured Somerset Maugham’s new play for Lily, and the two producers join forces to bring together actress and part and arrive in New York ready to take back Broadway.


Premiered n.d. In this one-act play, Emily Norbert, award-winning film actress in her early 30s, sits down for an interview with Gil Rafferty, a noted film critic in his 50s, who has followed her career since she was a precocious child-actress. Before Gil realizes it, Emily has turned the tables on him, so that Gil becomes the subject of the interview. Emily tries to get the critic to admit his obsession with her: “From a long, long distance apart from you, you manage to caress me, and then spank me with your words. Now you’re here with me, this close, and you can’t tell me with all the power and strength of your wonderful words that your professional interest is really fascination, that your fascination is obsession, and your obsession is sexual” (18). It turns out that Emily is putting on an act, seducing Gil as part of an FBI sting in order to find out if he is the one who has been sending her threats. Gil, however, is innocent, but Emily’s act has given him an even greater respect for her talent. The FBI catch the real culprit, Gil’s new
assistant Michelle, whose obsession with Emily has taken a dark turn. But Emily is sympathetic to Michelle and feels somewhat responsible for her stalker’s distress; the actress believes this might be the price of fame: “She was supposed to idolize me. That was the point of all the lessons you ever taught me, Mr. Raf…Gil. I was supposed to seduce her, and I did” (31).


No date. An educational short play based on Anna Cora Mowatt. The script’s preface is subtitled “An Actress Gives the American Theater Its First Play by a Woman,” noting that Mowatt “went on the stage at a time when no respectable woman dared risk her reputation by performing in public” (3). It goes on to explain that she made her mark as a playwright, touting Mowatt’s most well-known play Fashion (1845) as “the very first play to come from the pen of an American woman” (3). McCaslin’s playlet is divided into three parts, narrated by a Storyteller. The first scene depicts Anna Cora née Ogden as a child in her New York family home rehearsing Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream with her siblings, continuing the children’s tradition of performing for their father on his birthday. Young Anna Cora declares that “next year I’m going to write a play of my own!” (6). Scene two jumps ahead to a married Anna Cora enjoying rave reviews for the debut of her play Fashion: “Everyone was saying what a good play it was and what a refreshing change from the European drama we’re used to!” (12). Anna Cora’s husband James comments that no other woman could have written for the theatre without risking criticism and her reputation, but “People love her and know she’s a lady” (15). At this point Anna Cora also expresses her desire to become an actress. Her father comments on his daughter’s courage, boasting that “And I’m not at all sure she won’t do more to improve the reputation of the stage than it will do to hurt hers” (16). In the final scene, which McCaslin calls an epilogue, it’s June 1854 and the actress/playwright takes the stage after the curtain comes down on her final performance in Boston. Addressing her audience directly, she announces her retirement, expresses gratitude to her public, and bids a final farewell.


Premiered 1997 under the title Emphysema (A Love Story). Munsil’s two-character play is inspired by the actual meeting between Kenneth Tynan and silent movie star Louise Brooks in 1978, a three-day long interview Tynan conducted for his New Yorker Magazine Profile piece “The Girl in the Black Helmet,” published in 1979, events that are dramatized in the play and narrated by Tynan. The story begins in the present with Brooks, a recluse, learning that Tynan has recently died of emphysema. The story unfolds as a collage of the present and past, flashback and memory, theatre and film, and real life and fantasy. Tynan reveals his longtime infatuation with Louise Brooks as Lulu in Pandora’s Box, that “She is bound to every fantasy, to every erotic notion, to the very idea of sex, bound hand and foot to the bedpost with a silk stocking” (12). And when Tynan imagines meeting Brooks, it is actually Lulu he conjures. The play explores Brooks’s iconic status, the legacy of her film persona, which Tynan calls “angel whore”
and which has overshadowed the woman and actress, and the sexual and intellectual connection between the flawed drama critic and the object of his sexual desire.


Premiered 2009. A short one-act one-woman play that imagines the last 10 minutes of Marilyn Monroe’s life, post her physical death but before her soul has found rest in either heaven or hell. Stuck in a purgatory, Marilyn is shocked to learn that she must audition for heaven. Guided by cue cards and the offstage voice of her agent, she must adequately justify her life choices to impress unseen judges who now control her fate. About her acting career, she laments that her roles never allowed her to fully express herself. When her virtue is questioned she defends herself by pointing out that “men made the conditions of my hire” (9). In the end she is subjected to an interview, scrambling against the clock for satisfactory answers, as the countdown to her final curtain has begun. Asked about her many abortions, Marilyn struggles to explain, growing more and more desperate until her time runs out.


Premiered 2002. *Peeling* was commissioned by Graeae Theatre Company, which was established in 1980 and is Britain’s leading theatre company for people with physical and sensory impairments. The play is a behind-the-scenes story of the three actresses who form the chorus of an updated version of *The Trojan Women* which is currently taking place. The play-within-the-play is a grand visual spectacle, and the women wear outrageous dresses that are built into the set. While the actresses are always onstage in *The Trojan Women*, they are often unseen. And the scene shifts fluidly between the actresses being “in” and “out” of performance. While they wait for their next cue, the women eat, read, comment on the play, and share personal stories. During their “offstage” periods, they also take turns providing audio description of each other’s actions, dialogue which becomes less descriptive and more of a critical commentary as their stories of pregnancy and abortion start to illuminate and dovetail with Euripides’ play of sacrifice and war.


Premiered 1997. Set in 1924 and taking place over a weekend celebration aboard William Randolph Hearst’s yacht, this play is based on the true story of a mysterious death of Thomas Ince, a big-time Hollywood producer, and features a cast of historical characters. Guests enjoy Hearst’s legendary hospitality, drink bootleg champagne, dance the Charleston, and carry on behind closed doors. Hearst suspects that his public mistress, movie star Marion Davies, is having an affair with Charlie Chaplin. Marion’s flirting only confirms Hearst’s fears. And in a case of mistaken identity, Hearst shots Ince in the head, believing that he has caught Marion and Charlie in the act of plotting against him. Hearst’s cover story, that Ince had an ulcerous attack and was taken off the boat in the middle of the night for treatment, does not seem to explain the gunshots guests swear they heard, or the eye-witness account from the dock of Ince’s bandaged head before he
was loaded into an awaiting ambulance. In a display of power and wealth, buys his guests’ silence on the matter. Marion stays steadfastly by Hearst’s side.

Premiered 1994. The play is a ghost story set in 1990 at Karlaboy, a Hollywood mansion built in 1952 by the studio for its biggest star Karla Davin and her writer/director husband Harold Bachman. A new biography about the “secret life” of the late Karla Davin, a “revisionist testament” that posits Karla was “not an innocent girl corrupted by Hollywood, but rather—a shameless whore who self-destructed” (11), is about to hit shelves. Harold summons its author Bill Lauder to Karlaboy in order to set the record straight before his 3:15 am deadline, the time the ghost of Karla has told Harold he will die if he does not succeed in stopping the book’s distribution. Harold reveals to Bill that every year on the anniversary of her suicide in 1952 Karla has appeared to him at 3:15 am, the time of her death. Harold and Karla’s “true” story unfolds in a series of flashbacks to the 1950s, which reveal that Harold struggled with insecurities and professional jealousy. And although they share true feelings of love and devotion, it turns out that their marriage was a strategic career move for the couple as well as one of convenience, helping to cover up Harold’s homosexuality. Bill gets the scoop of the century when Harold shows him how he accidently shot his wife in the head.

Premiered 2011. Inspired by Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, the play is set in the present and concerns the fate of a beach house in posh East Hampton, New York owned by famous movie actress Laura Robertson. After her most recent breakup from a man who has bankrupt her, having disappeared her savings up his nose and the rest into a failed movie project, Laura arrives at her family beach house with her teenage daughter, Anne, and brother, Garret, to spend Memorial Day weekend with her stepdaughter, Vanessa, and her new fiancé, Jeremy. All soon learn that the Hampton property is mortgaged and that Laura is several months behind on her payments. The bank is threatening foreclosure. Jeremy, unemployed since being laid off from his investment banking job, proposes a solution that will save the house and net a small fortune: subdivide and sell off the land to developers. Laura has no interest in selling the dunes and is confident that she’ll be back at work soon: “One good part in a feature will do the trick” (20). When the big budget Hollywood movie falls through, Garret agrees to take out a loan on his New York apartment in order to refinance the Hampton property, only he and Laura have acted too late. The bank has already sold the mortgage to a group of investors, headed by Jeremy, who will develop it like Jeremy proposed the family should have done.

Premiered 1934. Set in 1912, after a prolonged absence, Stella returns to the comforts of Eden End, her family home, where she seeks refuge from the muddle of her life. She went on to the stage against her parents’ strong objections, especially her mother—now deceased—who had been raised with the “horror of theatres” (79).
Throughout her stay, Stella’s father, a town doctor, tenderly expresses his admiration for her, at one point even apologizing that he and her mother ever stood in her way. He now sees Stella as well-adjusted and self-sufficient, a better woman for having ventured into the world. He commends her for pursuing her own profession and enjoying a life of her own making. He also expresses his own regrets that he settled for a life smaller than his ambition; accordingly, we get the feeling that he is living through his eldest daughter’s accomplishments. Although she keeps up appearances, Stella has not had an easy life or a very successful career. “I wasn’t the great actress I thought I was going to be,” she confesses. “I wasn’t bad. I’m not bad. But somehow I’ve never been able to do what I thought I could do” (43). The prodigal daughter is soon forced back out on the road when her sister Lilian, who has dutifully stayed home to care for their widowed father, finds out Stella is married and invites her estranged husband, an actor, to Eden End. In order to keep the details of her professional struggles and personal trials from her father, Stella reconciles with her husband, a gesture that seems less romantic than practical, and the two hit the road in search of the next part that will bring in a paycheck.


Premiered 1993. Actress Lynn Redgrave, the third and youngest of the famous Redgrave acting family, part of the fourth generation of Redgrave actors, wrote and performed this one-woman play in two acts as a way to come to terms with her relationship with her deceased father, Sir Michael Redgrave, a man she is not sure she ever really knew. A larger than life image of Sir Michael as Antony is set upstage behind a scrim; made visible at various points, it fills the space with the glorious dream of Emperor Anthony as well as glorious presence of the actor who was one of the most respected actors of his generation. Lynn interweaves her narrative with characters and scenes from Shakespeare’s plays, playing the multiple characters. She was introduced to Shakespeare at 8 years old; Shakespeare was something of her father’s she could share in. As a child she had the thought that if she could just know the characters that her father played, she could perhaps also know the man who played them. Lynn recalls her distant but loving relationship with her father, her early fascination with acting, and how she came to dedicate herself to the family business, though early on she was told she displayed no talent. The play is an homage to the theatre and to generations of men and women players who have “bravely stood upon the stages of the world, filling the empty space with Kings and Queens and ordinary people, transporting audiences from their daily lives for ‘the two hours’ traffic of our stage’” (60).


Premiered 1993. Two actresses, one director, and one producer go round-robin in a series of meetings to try and save their film project in financial trouble. Collette believes that the success of this film will determine the trajectory of the rest of her acting career. With wide distribution she can parlay her turn as the film’s ingénue into a series of leading roles; but if the film goes straight to video she is “a character actress from here on. Somebody’s aunt, somebody’s crying sister” (28). For Brenda, who is known as
“personality,” this film could legitimize her as an actress, and she is doing everything in her power to make this a star turn including sleeping with the director and lying about her connections to big Hollywood names. In the end, the two actresses seem to cancel each other out: the director rejects their plans to save his film and comes up with his own path to salvation. To Collette and Brenda’s shock, he chooses to elevate the fortunes of the complete unknown Helen, expanding her part to make her the heroine of the film; in doing so he aligns himself with the film’s producer, Helen’s uncle.


Premiered 2011. Film director John picks unknown Kevin not only as the star of his next film, but as its subject. John spends a year interviewing Kevin and neuroimaging his brain in order to devise a film based on the “real” Kevin. Kevin’s girlfriend Jen is also an actor whose acting career is going nowhere but who plays supportive partner to Kevin as he navigates the opportunity of a lifetime. The couple’s relationship is weakened by long separations and Kevin’s growing insecurities, which seem to be part of his “process” as an actor. Although the film is a critical success, Kevin’s career fails to take off, sending Kevin into a downward spiral. Reaching for explanations, he worries that people might think he’s gay. Jen is a minor character in the play, though she is the only woman and is more than once the target of sexual innuendo—comments made by John that stir Kevin to jealousy. Unable to cope with Kevin’s obsessiveness any longer and frustrated about her own stalled career, Jen breaks up with Kevin. In the final scene, Kevin, who has left show business to return to university, runs into Jen at a Hollywood party and learns that John has cast her in his latest film, the story of a cancer patient who becomes empathetic after an experimental brain procedure, which she believes was inspired by John’s fascination with Kevin’s sensitive nature.


Premiered 1859. A contemporary melodrama that follows famous actress Kate Robertson, as she attempts to save her estranged sister, the respectable Lady Castlecrag, from her own folly, willing to risk everything, even her hard-earned reputation in the process. Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion and analysis of this play.


Premiered 2000. Originally performed as a one-woman show by its author, based on her experience of getting her first big Broadway break in the musical revue Ain’t Misbehavin’ in the late 1970s. Woodward has formatted the script to delineate each character’s dialogue so that it can also be performed by multiple actors. After graduating from a prestigious drama school in Chicago, Charlayne moves to New York and in with her white, Jewish boyfriend, much to her grandmother’s chagrin—“That child is free till she fool” (11), exclaims Grandmama. Armed with 5 (mostly classical) monologues—including Sophocles, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, and Ntozake Shange—she is shocked to realize that no one is going to hire a black actress in the plays that have made up her actor training. On the other hand, when an audition for Shange’s Colored Girls comes around, she is also not the shoo-in she expects to be, although she is
a “colored girl.” Alaina, a veteran cabaret actress, becomes her mentor, helping her navigate the business. Pressured by her agent, she auditions for *Ain’t Misbehavin*, faking her way through the tap dance and commenting that this was the first time she was asked to shake her boobs for an audition. Being cast in the show invites a new slew of challenges for the actress, including being judged (and judging herself) for being in a show where black performers are only asked to sing and dance—“I didn’t know we had to do that anymore” (34), says Charlayne’s father.


Premiered 1999. An episodic drama in two acts, the play features the loving if potentially taboo relationship between an actress and her adult son. Diane Barrow was “America’s sweetheart (9), whom everyone knows as the perfect mom from her hit and long-running TV show, which inspired a generation of women to emulate her character’s have-it-all success. Now that she is older, parts are not as easy to come by, and she is constantly reinventing herself to stay in the public eye—her latest venture is a low-impact workout video. Her son Russell is trying to find his own path, having recently dropped out of NYU’s Performance Studies program after realizing that no one could satisfactorily define the discipline. When, as part of a night of performance art, Russell performs a satirical monologue about being the victim of a happy past, it turns out that childhood stories he thought he made up might be repressed trauma from past child abuse at the hands of his mother. Subscribing to the doctrine there’s no such thing as bad publicity, Diane chooses to delay responding to the accusations that she is a child molester. In the meantime, everyone is trying to profit off of the scandal, including Russell’s father, who was the first to suggest that Russell’s fiction had hit upon a secret family truth and is pitching a movie of the week based on his ex-wife. Instead of solving the mystery of Russell’s childhood, the play focuses on how personal and cultural memory shapes truth, and how this truth is commodified by the entertainment industry. A year later, with the support of forgiving fans, Diane has made a comeback in a TV movie in which she played both herself and her own mother based on her best-selling book about her own troubled past, her personal journey of discovery, and breaking the cycle of abuse. She has reinvented herself once again and in the process is back on top, able to write her own ticket for future projects. Russell has started a theatre company and is directing his own version of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* in which Constantine lives.

Treadwell, Sophie. *O Nightingale*. 1925. TS. Box 8 Folder 3, Sophie Treadwell Papers MS 124, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, AZ.

Premiered 1925. Loney Lee is a young aspiring actress who hopes to make it on Broadway. Although armed with ambition, talent, and strong Midwestern values, she cannot seem to get the break she needs or deserves. Theatre, it turns out, is a man’s business. Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the play.

Premiered 1996. Set at the posh Hotel Carlyle, New York City in 1962, Lillian Lamour, the “greatest sex symbol the world has ever known” (6) whom no one has seen since 1947, is about to come out of retirement. Through a set of farcical circumstances, which include the occasional interference of a lion, Lamour is revealed to be a man, a truth that no one, not even her daughter Rita, knows. With the help of the bell boy, Lamour’s press agent Chick Lipton scrambles to create a plausible cover story in order to get Lamour’s lion bite the medical attention it needs while keep his star’s secret and tonight’s grand coming out party on track. As a woman of a certain age, Lamour’s eminent public reemergence brings up the question of meeting expectations: can she live up to her legend and the sex goddess image she spent a lifetime cultivating? After Lamour’s secret is revealed, Lipton must cross dress as Lamour to maintain her identity, lending new meaning to “Chick,” his first name. The invention of Lamour’s brother Patrick allows the actress to fake her own death by lion and maintain her leading lady identity to the end, thwarting all attempts to unveil the “real” Lillian Lamour, and putting suspicions about her duplicity to rest for good.

Premiered 1833. The actress who was to speak the prologue to the new play at the Drury Lane Theatre has taken ill. The king suggests that Nell Gwynne, the orange girl, take her place, and while Nell is reluctant the gentlemen think it is a splendid idea. Charles comments: “She is a spirited creature, and shan’t sell oranges her entire life, if I can help it” (12). The new prologue is a response to the spectacle staged last night at a rival theatre, where a popular actress greatly entertained the audience when she spoke the prologue wearing a very large hat. The play is a series of episodes that showcase Nell’s kind and generous nature. Early in the play Nell hopes that she will not always be an orange girl and makes the promise, if “ever I ever get well off, I’ll never forget my companions” (8). Nell befriends a destitute and lame soldier; she saves Charles and Rochester from being robbed at gunpoint; she motivates the king to build a convalescent hospital for disabled veterans as well as inspires him to contribute to the dowry of a woman enabling her to marry; and finally, Nell saves a clergyman from being arrested for debt by paying off the collectors.

Premiered 1975. Set in a small Southern town, William’s play takes its name from a stock piece from the repertory of Felice and Clare, a brother and sister acting team, who are in the middle of an exhausting and seemingly never-ending tour. A cablegram informs them that they have been abandoned by their company and crew, who are fed up because they have not been paid in some time: “Your sister and you are—insane!” (321), reads the message, an accusation that does not seem to faze the duo. Despite Clare’s insistence that Felice cancel the evening’s performance so she may rest, and the fact that the crew left before putting up the play’s set, an audience has arrived and The Two-Character Play goes on. Asserting her dominance, a drugged up Clare cautions Felice that she intends to make cuts and otherwise improvise during performance. The Two-
*Character Play* tells the story of a traumatized brother and sister, newly orphaned by a terrible accident, and their attempts to maintain some sense of normalcy in the face of financial ruin. As they plot and quarrel, fear and paranoia keep the brother and sister, also called Felice and Clare, from being able to leave their parents’ house for any reason, not even for groceries which are desperately needed. The actors Felice and Clare judge their success by their ability to get lost in the performance of the play and temporarily put aside their own plotting and quarreling. After the performance they find that they have inadvertently been locked in the theatre and are forced to spend the night and wait for a morning rescue. “I’ve always suspected that theatres are prisons for players,” comments Clare, to which her brother replies, “Finally, yes. And for writers of plays…” (364). Cold, tired, and suspicious about a gun that might or might not be a prop, they decide to pass the time by escaping back into the play.


Premiered 1997. Based on the first Asian American actress to break through on the stage and screen, the play begins as Anna May Wong lobbies for a part in the “all-oriental” *Flower Drum Song* (which she doesn’t get). Then, in flashback, it chronicles the ups and many downs of her career in a series of fluid and fast-paced episodes. Except for the actress playing Anna May, each actor plays multiples parts, adding to the high energy as well as dream-like atmosphere. Even though Anna May breaks through many racial barriers, she is exoticized and typecast—as slave girl and dragon lady—and regulated to supporting roles, though she sees herself as a leading lady playing opposite mainstream Hollywood stars like Gary Cooper. But she is too Chinese to play in American films; and then discovers she is too American to play in Chinese films. The tradition of yellow-face still prevailed in American film, and, humiliatingly, Anna May would be employed by the studio to teach white women how to act “oriental” and be “exotic.” Also of note is the depiction of Anna May’s friendship with fellow actress Marlene Dietrich, her “twin dragon” (52).