The Public’s Open to Us All

The Public's Open to Us All: Essays on Women and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England

Edited by

Laura Engel

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

The Public's Open to Us All: Essays on Women and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England,
Edited by Laura Engel

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0173-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0173-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project began as a conference on “Women and Performance in the Eighteenth-Century” held at Duquesne University in March 2006. Many thanks to Linda Kinnahan, the chair of the English department at the time, and Francesco Ceasareo, the dean of the college at the time, for supporting this event, as well as John Lane, Director of the Theater Arts program, for co-organizing the conference and putting on a wonderful production of Nicholas Rowe’s “Jane Shore.” I also want to particularly thank Penny Gay, Melinda Finberg, and Linda Troost, who were the keynote speakers at the conference, and then agreed to participate in the present volume. Thank you to Amanda Millar at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for contacting me initially about the possibility of doing a book project on the subject of the conference and to the staff and editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their excellent work on the collection. Two NEH grants and a sabbatical leave were essential to the completion of this project, and I would like to thank Albert Labriola, Acting Dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts at Duquesne, for his significant support. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the English Department at Duquesne for their continued professional and personal generosity—with a special note of thanks to the chair of the Department, Magali Michael. This project would not have been possible without the brilliant copyediting skills of Jessica Jost-Costanzo, whose dedication and diligence made the book even better than I imagined it could be. Thanks as well to Suzanne Cook for her terrific work on the index. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, especially John and Henry for enriching my life and my work in more ways than I can express.

INTRODUCTION

LAURA ENGEL

In June of 1792 the celebrated novelist Frances Burney had a bizarre encounter while visiting John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in Pall Mall. In a letter to her sister Susanna Phillips, Burney describes being followed around the room by the eccentric actress Mary Wells. After sitting too close to Burney's friend Mrs. Crewe, striking various strange poses, and dropping her nosegay dramatically in front of Mr. Burney, Wells began to sing passages "without words or connections," further alarming the group. When Burney and her companions tried to complain, Mrs. Wells apparently exclaimed "It's very hard, very cruel indeed to take such notice of people in public. The Public's open to us all, and we have all a right to behave how we please."[1] Burney responds by attempting to dissuade Mrs. Crewe from "competition with this lady," describing Wells as "a wild, half-crazy woman, accustomed to indulge herself in all her whims as I had witnessed in Weymouth, where absurdly as she behaved, she was opposed by nobody, and seemed always to regard herself as a privileged person." Mrs. Crewe answers: "I don't understand such privileges. If she assumes them as hers, what in the meantime is to become of ours?"[2]

Mrs. Crewe's telling remark—if Wells assumes the privilege to act in any way she pleases because of her celebrity, what will happen to those who are supposed to have privileges as a result of their "actual" status in British society—is a clear expression of the anxiety that Wells's behavior instilled in spectators outside of the comfortable boundaries of the theatre. While Wells's antics were certainly annoying, the most galling aspect of the incident according to Mrs. Crewe was the boldness of her behavior as an actress in relation to a group of people who were clearly above her in social status.

I borrow Wells's phrase "The Public's Open to us All" for part of the title for this collection because it highlights several crucial questions that the contributors to the volume address. What does it mean for women of varied backgrounds, professions, and classes to have the public open to them? What are the parameters for acceptable behavior for women in the public sphere? How do public professions such as acting and authorship

change notions of female agency and subjectivity? How are new roles for women reflected in their creative work on stage, on the page, off stage, and in the world?

"The Public's Open to Us All": Essays on Women and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England considers the relationship between British women and various modes of performance in the long eighteenth century. From the moment Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1660, the question of women's status in the public world became the focus of cultural attention both on and off the stage. In addition to the appearance of the first actresses during this period, female playwrights, novelists, poets, essayists, journalists, theatrical managers, and entrepreneurs emerged as skillful and often demanding professionals. In these various new roles, eighteenth-century women redefined shifting notions of femininity by challenging traditional representations of female subjectivity and contributing to the shaping of eighteenth-century society's attitudes, tastes, and cultural imagination.

Recent scholarship in eighteenth-century studies reflects a heightened interest in fame, the rise of celebrity culture, and new ways of understanding women's participation as both private individuals and public professionals. From works on individual actresses such as Sarah Siddons, Mary Robinson, Dorothy Jordan, and Charlotte Charke, to studies that address how female performers, authors, and playwrights influenced the culture at large, to essay collections such as *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere* and *Lewd and Notorious*, important work has been done to establish the range and impact of women's participation and presence in the public sphere.[3] What is unique to the body of essays presented here is the authors' focus on performance as a means of thinking about the ways in which women occupied, negotiated, re-imagined, and challenged the world outside of the traditional domestic realm. The authors employ a variety of historical, literary, and theoretical approaches to the connections among women and performance, and in doing so make significant contributions to the fields of eighteenth-century literary and cultural studies, theatre history, gender studies, and performance studies.

"The Public's Open to Us All" grew out of a conference at Duquesne University on "Women and Performance in the Eighteenth Century." Several of the contributors were speakers at the conference while others joined the project later on, which means that the range of topics covered in the volume was generated by the research that people were engaged in around the topic. While the essays in the book do tackle a wide range of issues, they are by no means the last word, and they are not meant to represent a comprehensive view of the eighteenth century. My hope is that

the collection will be an important part of what will continue to be an ongoing critical conversation about women and performance in the eighteenth century, perhaps including a greater emphasis in the future on questions of race, empire, cosmopolitanism, and global politics.

Women, Performance, and the Public Sphere: "Lord! Here's the talking creature come again!"[4]

Since the publication of Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois society*, scholars have taken issue with Habermas's formulation of distinct private and public spheres for men and women in the eighteenth century.[5] Habermas's definition of the public sphere as a space in which "members of the public" could meet to discuss and debate "the affairs of state" excludes the direct participation of women and only vaguely acknowledges the significance of their presence and participation in public discourse. [6]In his seminal article "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," Lawrence E. Klein offers useful models for understanding the varied types of public spheres operating in the eighteenth-century as well as how these categories contain elements of what we might consider to be both public and private realms.[7] According to Klein, "Generally in the eighteenth century, the distinction between the private and the public did not correspond to the distinction between home and not-home. Two implications result. First privacy was ascribed to forms of life that we would consider public. Second and more important, people at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private. Even if, then, women spent more time at home, they were not necessarily spending more time in private."[8] He proposes "The point is that even when theory was against them, women in the eighteenth century had public dimensions to their lives. Moreover, engaging in those public practices involved a consciousness that they were behaving publicly and that their behavior implied it's own sanction. The question is then how to get closer to this behavior and this consciousness."[9] The authors in this collection take up this project, and ultimately provide a range of evidence that women were involved, if not always directly, in what Klein defines as the civic, the economic, and the associative public spheres.[10] As the authors in the book demonstrate, the term "public," when applied to the lives and professional occupations of eighteenth-century women, takes on a variety of different meanings.

For the authors in this collection women's participation in the public sphere denotes the act of doing something publicly, for example

publishing a novel or play, acting on the stage, managing a theatre company, and/or thematically engaging with the complex questions posed by women's often ambiguous position in the public sphere in writing literary and dramatic works. The term "performance" refers to theatrical, authorial, social, criminal, spectacular, and managerial performances, as well as to the thematic and theoretical possibilities that performance presents in works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama.

Defining the term "performance" for women in the eighteenth century is directly tied to the variety and complexity of women's involvement in public life and discourse. Eighteenth-century definitions of performance include the act itself ("carrying out of something commanded or undertaken"), the accomplishment and quality of the act performed ("the competence or effectiveness of such a person in performing an action"), and the instance/experience of performing the act in public ("The action of performing a play, a piece of music, a ceremony" in front of an audience).[11] These definitions of performance imply that the performer is always subject to the politics of visibility and judgment, perhaps the two elements that most distinctly defined the ways in which women were perceived and evaluated in eighteenth-century culture.

All The World's A Stage: Powerful Performance or Scandalous Display?

In her analysis of the impact of women's presence in the public eye, Caroline Gonda poses this crucial question: "Is the 'public sphere' in some sense already a stage, and therefore an improper space for women or a space only for improper women? If 'bad women' are necessarily public are all women's public appearances shadowed or tainted?"[12] For Gonda, performance metaphors are used too frequently in academic discourse to describe women's power and agency. She rightly points out that not all performances are received favorably and grimly concludes "women's presence in the public eye is not automatically a cause for celebration."[13]

Several of the essays in this volume suggest a fresh look at Gonda's formulation of the value and impact of women's presence and performances in the public realm. For these authors women's presence in the public eye can be a cause for celebration. Penny Gay's essay "'So persuasive an Eloquence'? Roles for Women on the eighteenth-century stage" makes an important case for the connections between the eloquence given to women on stage and the powerful impact of women's speech and writing off stage. Helen Brooks's essay on actress-managers in the eighteenth-century theatre opens up new ways of thinking about the

significance of women's active roles in theatrical management and business negotiations both inside and outside of the theatre. Three essays about the playwright, novelist, and theatrical historian Aphra Behn by Rita Allison Kondrath, Amy Scott-Douglass, and Mary Trull clearly demonstrate that in a variety of genres Behn was a literary and cultural force to be reckoned with. Allison Kondrath, Scott-Douglass, and Trull explore the ways in which Behn cleverly negotiated the politics of female authorship to question, highlight, and re-envision female performances and their significance in eighteenth-century society. Carol Howard's essay on the novelist, playwright, and essayist Eliza Haywood's rarely examined scene, "The Female Freemason," explores "the traces of this artifact of cultural history—a farce purporting to expose the secrets of an all-male civic organization—in a way that brings together issues of gender, politics, and civic life and that illuminates the study of women and performance in the transgressive theatre of the 1730s."[14] Howard's examination of Haywood's "exposure of freemasonry" makes a persuasive argument for the impact of female authorship and performance on the male dominated realms of civic, literary, and theatrical politics.[15]

While some authors emphasize the power and positive impact of female theatrical and authorial performances, other authors in the collection focus on the visual and spectacular aspects of female performances, which can have both negative and positive consequences. Liberty Smith's essay on the threat of female fans "obsessed with the sexual strangeness of castrati" in Henry Fielding's "The Historical Register of the Year 1736" explores how overlapping tensions of gender, sexuality, and national boundaries converge in the play in the relationship between the female spectators and the ambiguously gendered castrati. The female spectator's desire for these performers unsettles a familiar visual economy of desire that marks the male as subject and the female as object. Smith argues that through these potentially subversive theatrical representations, Fielding ultimately envisions a "coming world in which everyone is at once a performer and audience member in a never-ending production of fashionable identity."[16] Susan Howard's essay on "Gendered Spectacle" in Frances Burney's *Evelina* examines the heroine's growing awareness of the pleasures and pitfalls of acting as and being seen as a spectacle throughout the novel. Howard argues that Burney uses Evelina's journey in order to educate her readers "to learn how one should respond to vulnerability in society."[17] Nadia Bishai examines the compelling and often overlooked connections among women and performance on the stage and the scaffold in the earlier part of the century. Bishai argues "As public displays of the female body in late seventeenth-century England become

increasingly acceptable, actual instances of public execution of women (and men) drop. Together, these phenomena create a cultural gap that the theatre fills through its unique relationship with the scaffold and newly acquired female actresses."[18] Bishai's work provides an important example of the ways in which literary and material histories combine to reveal new ways of thinking about women and performance in the early modern world.

Performing the Self: Creating Female Identities

Current work on the link between performance and gender identity provides a theoretical framework for many of the essays in the collection. In particular, the idea that gender can be seen as a series of socially constructed and repeated acts informs the ways in which several authors consider how female identities were manipulated and formulated according to specific societal codes.[19] As Judith Butler has argued, "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender."[20] The idea of gender as constructed and not essentialized, as materializing according to specific cultural codes and scripts that are particular to individual time periods certainly shifts and changes at different moments in the century. For many of the authors it is crucially important to see eighteenth-century women as actively involved in constructing their own versions of female identity, a process frequently and sometimes dangerously at odds with the culture at large.

Lisa Wilson's essay on the actress, poet, novelist, and essayist Mary Robinson, for example, examines Robinson's "successful metamorphosis" from the glamorous and morally suspect actress and mistress of the Prince of Wales to the "sympathetic poet Laura Maria" a prominent member of the Della Cruscan literary circle. Wilson proposes "throughout her career, shaped as it was by an excruciatingly public gaze, Mary Robinson remained intensely self-conscious about her relationship to the critical apparatus, and she took an active role in shaping her public identity."[21] Danielle Gissinger's piece on connections between the autobiographical performance strategies of the eighteenth-century actress and author Charlotte Charke and the contemporary visual artist Cindy Sherman uses current theories of gender, performance, and subjectivity to explore how these two seemingly unrelated figures are startlingly similar in their ability to propose new ways of representing female agency, authorship, and identity in their "self-portraits." Gissinger contends, "The two women test boundaries and challenge social norms by assuming different personas through the construction of corporeal representations, presenting to their

audience a disjointed, layered identity, rather than a core, essential self. In doing so, Charke and Sherman do not assert that women *are* the body, but that they *have* bodies, and those bodies can be manipulated, transcended and used as texts to convey a message that is not necessarily autobiographical."[22]

Gissinger's exploration of Charke and Sherman's demystification of the seemingly natural association of femininity with embodiment echoes Nadia Bishai's and Susan Howard's observations and questions about the ways in which representations of female bodies are linked to assumptions about female character, morality, and selfhood. In this way the essays in the collection engage in a project of intertextuality. Reading these pieces in dialogue with one another provides a way of beginning to think about mapping a history of performed identities both real and imagined.

Contemporary Ideas: Eighteenth-Century Performances in the Twenty First Century

In the last section of the book the terms "public" and "performance" take on new meanings when the eighteenth century is translated to the twenty-first century. These authors attempt to look forward, proposing connections between the eighteenth century and our own, providing new ways to think pedagogically and practically about how the issues of eighteenth-century women and performance can work in the present day on stage, on film, and in performance. Juliette Wells examines the figure of the "accomplished woman" in current film adaptations of Jane Austen novels. Looking at a variety of different films, Wells provides exciting evidence for the ways in which eighteenth-century questions of image, beauty, accomplishment, and courtship are still alive and well in contemporary society.

Gilli Bush-Bailey and Melinda Finberg illustrate how scholarship and theatrical practice are inextricably linked. Bush-Bailey's essay on contemporary performances of Susanna Centlivre's plays in London and Finberg's piece on dramaturgical strategies in a recent production of Hannah Cowley's *The Belle Stratagem* in Oregon reveal a variety of useful ways of thinking about how to keep the eighteenth-century alive in the twenty-first century. Finberg describes in detail the experience of "translating" an eighteenth-century classic onto a contemporary commercial stage. Bush-Bailey looks at revivals of plays by eighteenth-century women playwrights in both main-stage and fringe productions, paying close attention to how those productions were staged and received by audiences and reviewers. Despite the difficulties involved in restoring

the work of these authors, Bush-Bailey writes hopefully "with a new generation of performers, directors, artistic directors and, crucially, actresses with the kind of artistic and commercial clout to seize the 'forgotten' roles that are on offer, we might look forward to a revised classical repertoire; a dramatic repertoire in which plays on our main stages match those on our library shelves."[23]

At the end of her essay Danielle Gissinger makes a telling statement about the complexities of analyzing texts from an academic perspective. "While Charke and Sherman provide multidimensional selves/texts, the lasting result of their work is the narrative that we, as viewers/readers, construct from the (con)textual ambiguity."[24] As contemporary scholars we always have to be aware of the potential possibilities as well as the limitations of our investigations into the past. Ultimately, it is important to think about the past as a series of performances that we can never quite recover. What we have are traces and fragments of lives lived that we can never accurately or completely reassemble. Yet, like the ghostly nature of performance, the efforts of these playwrights, novelists, actresses, businesswomen, and other public figures to forge new ground for women still haunt and enrich our lives today. One of the strong, common threads of these essays is a repeated examination of the constant struggle for women to define their own agency and artistry in a world that wished to define them as much less capable than men. Over two centuries later we continue to negotiate and to define the parameters of the same vital and compelling questions.

Bibliography

Asleson, Robyn, ed. *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraits.* Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999.

—. *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture 1776-1812.* New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2003.

Baruth, Phillip E. ed. *Introducing Charlotte Charke: Actress, Author, Enigma.* Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998.

Burroughs, Catherine. *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000.

Byrne, Paula. *Perdita: The Literary, Theatrical, and Scandalous Life of Mary Robinson.* New York: Random House, 2006.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

Gonda, Caroline. "Mistresses, Murderesses and Magdalens: women in the public eye" in *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere 1700-1830*. eds.

Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O. Gallachoir, and Penny Warburton, 53-74. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Eger, Elizabeth, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O. Gallachoir, Penny Warburton, eds. *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere 1700-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001.

Kittredge, Katherine. *Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2003.

Klein, Lawrence E. "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no.1 (1996) 97-109.

Lowenthal, Cynthia. *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2003.

Marsden, Jean. *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage 1660-1720*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2006.

Perry, Gill. *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre 1768-1820*. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2007.

Pascoe, Judith. *Romantic Theatricality: Gender Poetry and Spectatorship.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997.

Sabor, Peter and Lars E. Troide, eds., *Frances Burney Journals and Letters.* London and New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, eds. *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance.* Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2002.

Straub, Kristina. *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992.

Wanko, Cheryl. *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Lubbock: Texas Tech Univ. Press, 2003.

West, Shearer. *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Peter Sabor and Lars E. Troide, eds., *Frances Burney Journals and Letters* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 350.
[2] Ibid., 352.
[3] Specific examples of exemplary work in this field include two books by Robyn Asleson and studies by Baruth, Burroughs, Byrne, Eger, Kittredge, Lowenthal, Marsden, Perry, Pascoe, Straub, Wanko, and West
[4] Penny Gay, 25.
[5] For more on specific critiques of Habermas's definition of the public sphere see Elizabeth Egers and others, eds., *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 18.
[6] Egers quoting Habermas. Ibid., 7.
[7] Lawrence E. Klien, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996): 97-109.
[8] Ibid., 104-105.
[9] Ibid., 102.
[10] According to Klein the civic sphere is a public realm that was defined by "the shared or the common or pertaining to society as a whole," the economic sphere encompassed a realm where "economic activities (both productive and consumptive) went on in settings that were most often recognizably public." The associative sphere was a "sphere of social, discursive, and cultural production." Ibid., 104.
[11] *Oxford English Dictionary* (on-line), s.v. "performance."
[12] Caroline Gonda, "Mistresses, Murderesses, and Magdalens: Women in the Public Eye," in *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere1700-1830*, eds. Elizabeth Eger and others (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 66
[13] Ibid., 68.
[14] Carol Howard, 128.
[15] Ibid., 137.
[16] Liberty Smith, 67.
[17] Susan Howard, 203.
[18] Nadia Bishai, 225.
[19] See Judith Butler's discussion of gender and its relationship to performance in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[20] Quoted in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2002), 20.
[21] Lisa Wilson, 156.
[22] Danielle Gissinger, 246.
[23] Gilli Bush-Bailey, 295.
[24] Danielle Gissinger, 261.

PART I

THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES

CHAPTER ONE

"SO PERSUASIVE AN ELOQUENCE"? ROLES FOR WOMEN ON THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STAGE

PENNY GAY

My title comes from the 1739 theatrical satire, *The School for Wives Criticis'd*, a translation of Molière's work of 1663, in which he defends his earlier misogynistic piece *L'Ecole des femmes*. The English translators Henry Baker and James Miller attempted to excuse the master: "By the Choice of ridiculous Characters, which he introduc'd, he appears to have had it as much in view to satirize his Censurers as to apologize for his Piece."[1] One of the protesting women says of another's disparaging comments on the play,

> Heavens! most elegantly spoke! I shou'd have thought this Piece had been good; but the Lady has so persuasive an Eloquence, she turns things in so agreeable a manner, that one must be of her Opinion in spite of ones own. (Sc. 3)

Should women express unconventional opinions? Should they speak up for their sex? Molière and his translators/adaptors seem to have it both ways here. They are ambivalent about female eloquence in the real social world—yet the success of this play, and many others, depends on its spirited embodiment of that world. Conflict and argument are, after all, structurally central to the vast majority of dramatic works, whether comic, satirical, or tragic.

Female eloquence, in roles written for adult actresses, had become a notable phenomenon in the theatre by the end of the seventeenth century. Playwrights had begun writing roles that allowed adult women to represent characters who debate the often conventional plot situations they find themselves in. Rowe's Calista, Behn's Angellica, and Congreve's Millamant are striking examples in different genres. In these roles,

following the example of Shakespeare, rather than (or perhaps as well as) presenting primarily an erotic spectacle for the enjoyment of a male-dominated audience, female interiority is given expression. Its first notable post-Restoration appearance is in the "she-tragedies," a term invented by Nicholas Rowe and popularized with his two major plays, *The Fair Penitent* (1703) and *Jane Shore* (1716). In these, however, female eloquence largely expresses a sense of abjection. Nevertheless, although Calista, the Fair Penitent, finally dies by her own hand, at the centre-point of the play (the beginning of Act III), she has a famously eloquent speech that may have contributed to this play's continuing popularity throughout the eighteenth century. She has been set up to marry her father's friend Altamont, although she has secretly been seduced by the cad Lothario:

> How hard is the Condition of our Sex,
> Thro' ev'ry State of Life the Slaves of Man?
> In all the dear delightful Days of Youth,
> A rigid Father dictates to our Wills,
> And deals out Pleasure with a scanty Hand;
> To his, the Tyrant Husband's Reign succeeds
> Proud with Opinion of superior Reason,
> He holds Domestick Bus'ness and Devotion
> All we are capable to know, and shuts us,
> Like Cloyster'd Ideots, from the World's Acquaintance,
> And all the Joys of Freedom; wherefore are we
> Born with high Souls, but to assert our selves,
> Shake off this vile Obedience they exact,
> And claim an equal Empire o'er the World. (3.1)

As the speech rises to its climax, Calista claims women's freedom to make "their own Choice" in marriage; as she exits, she concludes resoundingly that she would prefer to spend her life in a convent and "Free from the Marriage Chain, and from that Tyrant, Man" (3.1). This sounds uncannily like Mary Wollstonecraft in blank verse, yet it pre-dates the *Vindication* by almost a century. Calista was a role relished, in fact, by every major tragedienne up to and including Sarah Siddons—despite the immodesty of her on-stage and off-stage relationship with Lothario.

Although the she-tragedies maintained their crowd-pulling status throughout the century (along with a few Shakespeare tragedies, they were the bedrock of Sarah Siddons's late eighteenth-century career), comedies and sentimental dramas of contemporary life were the predominantly popular modes of drama. In this context, it is interesting to note the emphatic persistence throughout the century of successful comedies that enable women to speak out about the trials of unhappy marriage:[2] *The*

Provoked Husband (1727), *The Suspicious Husband* (1747) *The Jealous Wife* (1761). In these plays (and many others not so obviously titled) adult women within an unhappy marital relationship eloquently express their distress. In most cases they are eventually "tamed," but not without saying a good deal more than Katherina the Shrew was ever allowed to say. Garrick's hugely popular adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Catherine and Petruchio* (1754), can also be read as a contribution to this debate—its farce elements and sub-plot are largely removed, and its famous last speech for Kate is split into a duet between the two spouses expressing a mutually shared ideal of marriage. In this essay I will concentrate on samples of female eloquence from a range of popular contemporary plays, mostly focusing on the relations between adult women and men, and newly written for the actresses who starred in them; and I will tentatively sketch a potential narrative of public female eloquence in the course of the century.

Beginning cautiously in the 1750s and peaking in the 1780s, women's debating clubs became a distinctive sub-group of the rage for public oratory (which included lower-class men's alehouse "spouting" clubs). As Betty Rizzo asks in her important essay on this topic, "How likely … was a woman to maintain silence in a century obsessed with oratorical performance?"[3] She points out that "the declamation of actors provided [a] model" for young aspirational men; and the "young ladies" who at first performed in public were often, it seems, actresses happy to pretend to be lady amateurs and earn considerably more than they would do as part of the acting ensemble at a theatre.[4] By the 1780s public meetings of women's clubs such as La Belle Assemblée were hugely popular events, attracting audiences of both men and women, with newspapers now reporting on the genuine gentility and surprising eloquence of the female participants. Although, generally, the debates eschewed contemporary political questions,[5] there were certainly many topics which had a bearing on the politics of gender, particularly on women's right to speak and to have an opinion on serious matters. But by 1790, Rizzo argues, this freedom was voluntarily given up in response to "the horror of the French Revolution and a distrust of Marianne shrieking at the barricades."[6]

The narrative of women's participation in public debate has been thoroughly explored in the work of Rizzo, Michaelson, and Mary Thale among others.[7] It is worth asking (though it is too big an issue for the current essay) whether there was a connection between the eloquence given to women on stage and the transgressive speech possible in such forums as the female debates. The retreat to more conventional speech, reflected in Rizzo's comment about shrieking Marianne, can certainly be

seen in the new fashion for "German drama" in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth. It is also arguable that the wit of Jane Austen's fascinating but immoral Mary Crawford is a throwback to earlier models of female eloquence, most notably the heroines of Hannah Cowley. I will briefly discuss these late developments towards the end of this essay.

****

Since the introduction of women actors to the stage at the Restoration, there had been a steady growth in their acceptance and respectability. By the time of the Garrick period, there were as many female "stars," proportionally to the population, as there are today, and as many variations of performance styles and private lives. Many of the actresses of this period were independent businesswomen ("Mrs." only for convenience and respectability), running their own theatres, negotiating their acting contracts, arguing with managers about their roles. They were articulate and eloquent—despite the presence, as ever, of the occasional brainless beauty on the lookout for a rich lover, preferably one with a title.

Valuable work has been done by feminist historians about the conditions of work of these women, whether actresses, playwrights, managers, or all three. What effect, might we speculate, did the employment of adult women in female roles have on the general social perception of women as speaking and feeling subjects? We can begin to look for answers in an analysis of their roles, not just as "carriers" of plot points and visual objects of sexual allure or pathos, or representations of various moral abstractions, but in what they *say*—their eloquence, their newly permitted ability to debate the often conventional plot situations they find themselves in. It is particularly revealing to look at the roles written newly for them, rather than their performances of older roles that might require (at least unconsciously) some historical framing.

Catherine (Kitty) Clive was the most famous of the mid-century's comediennes; her career lasted from 1728 (when she was 17) to 1768; she died in 1785. Several aspects of her career are of particular interest to my argument. First of all, and contrary to a popular myth about eighteenth-century actresses, she lived a life free of sexual scandal, having made a brief marriage (perhaps of convenience) to George Clive, a lawyer; they separated by mutual agreement after two years. Although Kitty had many male friends, she was never amorously linked with anyone, and she lived in her old age tranquilly at Twickenham sharing a chaste friendship with the writer and dilettante Horace Walpole. Secondly, she was an

accomplished soprano singer, who could have made a career solely in musicals and operas (she was the first Dalila in Handel's *Samson*), but she gravitated more and more, as her career progressed, towards the contemporary roles being written for witty, eloquent women. Her roles numbered at least 180. It is particularly interesting that the role she frequently chose for her benefit night was Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*—Shakespeare's first witty, eloquent and proactive heroine. However, Kitty Clive usually received poor reviews for her "low comedy" Portia, in which she often parodied contemporary judges in the famous Trial Scene. Clearly her performance did not suit the standard view of the role as that of a noble and grave *grande dame*, reluctantly getting into male attire to save her true love (this idea of the role was the norm until the early- to mid-twentieth century).[8] But she kept on doing it: she had an instinct that it was indeed her role, and she could use it to satirize male authority. In her retirement she wrote to her protégée Jane Pope (who was in her turn to become a great comedienne): "I charge you to make a good part of it [a new role] let it be never so bad. I have often done so myself therefore I know *it is to be done* turn it & wind it & play it in a different manner to his intention and an hundred to one but you succeed."[9] Trust the actress, her instincts, her technique, her *presence*. It is very clever practical advice, and it goes counter to the standard instructions of eighteenth-century acting manuals, and even modern mantras about "serving the text/author." It provides a clue to Clive's success in such apparently unsympathetic roles as Mrs. Friendly or Lady Freelove (both briefly discussed below).

Most acting manuals in the eighteenth century have little to say about the performance of comedy: sentiment, sensibility, and the grand style of tragedy are what acting theory is about. But actors, even today, know that great comic ability is the hardest technique to learn, particularly if it is constrained by a pre-written script (rather than the improvisational anarchy of physical clowning). David Garrick was the century's pre-eminent actor because he could perform both comedy and tragedy scripts with a superb naturalism. Of his female colleagues, the nearest to him in possessing this versatility was his acting partner of twenty years, Hannah Pritchard. Garrick and Pritchard were famous as the Macbeths, but they were equally admired for their performances in Benjamin Hoadly's comedy mainpiece, *The Suspicious Husband* (1747). The two star actors did not play the leading roles of the lovers, or even those of the married couple who give the play its title, but rather, a fascinating pair of unconventional characters, who happen to be cousins. Ranger, as his name implies, is a rake—even trying to seduce his cousin Clarinda when he meets her as an anonymous

"mask." The suspicious husband of the play's title, Mr Strictland, does not like his wife associating with the free-spoken Clarinda. In Act II the trio of female friends—Clarinda, Jacintha (the *ingénue*), and Mrs. Strictland—discuss men and marriage: this is *Sex and the City*, eighteenth-century style, and a striking example of the staging of women supporting each other emotionally, rather than competing for men. Here are Clarinda's ideas about love-conquests:

> Clarinda: … Let me assure you, a Woman's surest Hold over a Man is to keep him in Incertainty. As soon as ever you put him out of Doubt, you put him out of your Power: But when once a Woman has awak'd his Curiosity, she may lead him a Dance of many a troublesome Mile without the least Fear of losing him at last.
>
> Jacintha: Now do I heartily wish he may have Spirit enough to follow, and use you as you deserve. Such a Spirit, with but a little Knowledge of our Sex, might put that Heart of yours into a strange Flutter.
>
> Clarinda: I care not how soon. I long to meet with such a Fellow. Our modern Beaux are such jointed Babies in Love, they have no Feeling. They are entirely insensible either of Pain or Pleasure, but from their own dear Persons: And according as we flatter, or affront their Beauty, they admire or forsake ours. They are not worthy even our Displeasure; and, in short, abusing them is but so much ill-nature merely thrown away. But the Man of Sense, who values himself upon his high Abilities: Or the Man of Wit, who thinks a Woman beneath his Conversation—To see such the Subjects of our Power, the Slaves of our Frowns and Smiles, is glorious indeed. (2.1)

Francis Gentleman, in his contemporary survey of the stage, *The Dramatic Censor* (1770), commented at length on the success of *The Suspicious Husband*: "No play has appeared with greater éclat for many years than the Suspicious Husband did at its first appearance, nor is any comedy more likely to live from an uncommon vivacity of dialogue, variety and pleasantry of incidents."[10] Garrick's star role of Ranger worried Gentleman because "Ranger is … a gilded bait of vice, for youth and vanity to snap at; and all his transactions tend at least to inflame, if not to taint the imagination."[11] But for the equivalent role of Clarinda, Gentleman has nothing but praise:

> she is furnished with a large fund of spirits, and a slight dash of the coquette; yet capable of a settled, sincere passion, without any tendency to

> imprudent actions. She likes to rally, and has a pleasant flow of expression, but never sacrifices delicacy at the shrine of licentious wit.[12]

Mrs. Pritchard in playing this role (which she played for seventeen consecutive seasons) had "a freedom and fire of expression in her performance, that we have never seen surpassed."[13] Gentleman has to resort to metaphor to explain the affective power of Pritchard's performance; another commentator slated it home to her technique, suggesting that she was *unafraid* to be on stage talking: "however voluble her part might require her to be not a syllable of articulation was lost … She was a mistress of dramatic eloquence in familiar dialogue."[14]

Hannah Pritchard frequently shared the stage with Kitty Clive; they were friends, and they also shared a number of roles (and, like Clive, Pritchard lived a blameless domestic life). But whereas Clive's forays into tragedy and sentimental drama were few and largely unsuccessful, Pritchard had a wide range and was greatly admired in all genres (over 150 roles; she also sang, though she was clearly not as accomplished in this as Clive). Her first major triumph was as Rosalind (another famously talkative woman) in *As You Like It*; Kitty Clive was the (singing) Celia. Pritchard played virtually all the major Shakespearean female roles, and many contemporary commentators thought her superior to the century's later Shakespearean star, Sarah Siddons, "for Versatility of Genius, or Comprehension of various Characters."[15]

George Colman (the elder's) comedy *The Jealous Wife* was premièred at Drury Lane on 12 February 1761 with the leading roles played by Hannah Pritchard, Kitty Clive, and Garrick. Hopkins, the company's prompter, noted that it "met with greater applause than anything since the *Suspicious Husband*."[16] It held the stage for the rest of the century and beyond. The play is not nearly as interested in the obstacles to the marriage of the young Charles and Harriot as it is in the marriage crisis of Mr. and Mrs. Oakly. These roles were written for the star team of Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard; and it is their long dialogue of disagreement that opens the play, signalling in no uncertain terms that Mrs. Oakly is a jealous, whining shrew, and her husband is submissive in order to preserve his marriage to a woman whom he (somewhat incredibly) still loves. Thus, in Mrs. Oakly the audience has an example of female eloquence misused, as is also the case for the very different role of the witty, malicious Lady Freelove, which was written for Kitty Clive.

Both Mrs. Oakly and Lady Freelove have a considerable number of soliloquies in which they announce their feelings and plans to the audience. Although neither is an admirable character, they are given the same right to speak to the audience as, earlier, only male characters had

had (as is the case in *The Suspicious Husband*). This breaking of the fourth wall convention attracts the audience's empathy despite their disapproval of the character. The result is a much more complex sense of the psychodynamics of the play. Some examples:

> Mrs. Oakly: After all, that Letter was certainly intended for my Husband. I see plain enough They are all in a Plot against Me. My Husband intriguing, the Major working Him up to affront Me, Charles owning his Letters, and so playing into each other's Hands.—They think Me a Fool I find—But I'll be too much for them yet—I have desired to speak with Mr. Oakly, and expect him Here immediately. His Temper is naturally open, and if He thinks my Anger abated, and my Suspicions laid asleep, He will certainly betray Himself by his Behaviour. I'll assume an Air of Good-humour, pretend to believe the fine Story They have trumped up, throw Him off his Guard, and so draw the Secret out of Him. Here He comes. How hard it is to dissemble one's Anger! O, I cou'd rate Him soundly! But I'll keep down my Indignation at present, though it choaks Me. (2.1)
>
> ..……
>
> Lady Freelove: It is a mighty troublesome Thing to manage a simple Girl, that knows nothing of the World. Harriot, like all other Girls, is foolishly fond of this young Fellow of Her own chusing, her first Love, that is to say, the first Man that is particularly civil, and the first Air of Consequence which a young Lady gives Herself. Poor silly Soul!—But Oakly must not have Her positively. A Match with Lord Trinket will add to the Dignity of the Family. I must bring Her into it. I will throw Her into his Way as often as possible, and leave Him to make his Party good as fast as He can. (2.3)

These opportunities for Garrick's two major female stars, Pritchard and Clive, to hold the stage "sola" with their characters' eloquence would no doubt have been relished by the actresses and their audiences. Each sets up the scene of intrigue and manipulation that follows. Most interestingly, whereas Mr. Oakly is fooled by his wife's subterfuge, Harriot, the play's *jeune première* (played by Miss Pritchard, Hannah's daughter who followed her into the profession), is in no way deceived by Lord Trinket or impressed by Lady Freelove's rank:

> Harriot: He is just polite enough to be able to be very unmannerly with a great deal of good Breeding, is just handsome enough to make Him most excessively vain of his Person, and has just Reflection enough to finish him for a

> Coxcomb; Qualifications, which are all very common among those whom your Ladyship calls Men of Quality. (2.3)

Harriot's numerous soliloquies later in the play are affecting appeals for the audience's sympathy with her plight as victim of the patriarchal plot that would treat her as a commodity. Harriot's biggest scene with her lover Charles (at the end of Act IV), far from being a conventional love-scene, becomes an eloquent critique of Charles's riotous habits, the subtext of which is a demand for a reformed masculinity, of a style modelled by Steele's *The Conscious Lovers—not* the emasculation that we see in the Oakly plot.

Given that two of the play's three major female roles are in varying degrees villains, it is not surprising that female solidarity, such as we saw in *The Suspicious Husband*, is not on the agenda. Harriot goes through her trials unsupported by a female friend: Lady Freelove sides with her class (Lord Trinket) rather than her fellow women; she "hates" Mrs. Oakly and only agrees to see her out of spite towards Harriot: "Whatever She wants, I'll draw some sweet Mischief out of it" (3.1) In fact she takes the opportunity to feed Mrs. Oakly's unfounded suspicions of her husband. This classic scene of catty exchange between women, some three and a half pages of text, would undoubtedly have been played for laughs between the two star actresses. As with the soliloquies, the audience would suspend moral judgement in favour of pleasure in watching two top actresses display their technique in pointed dialogue—knowing all the while that the play's comedy genre guaranteed an outcome of poetic justice and conservative closure. Lady Freelove's final speech, having lost the attempt to manoeuvre Harriot into Lord Trinket's clutches, is a fine example of the frustrated high society villainess:

> Mercy on Me! how boisterous are these Country Gentlemen! … But the Reputations of Women of Quality are not so easily impeached—My Rank places Me above the Scandal of little People, and I shall meet such petty Insolence with the greatest Ease and Tranquillity. But You and your simple Girl will be the Sufferers—I had some Thoughts of introducing Her into the first Company—But now, Madam, I shall neither receive nor return your Visits, and will entirely withdraw my Protection from the ordinary Part of the Family. (5.3)

One can see where Austen's Lady Catherine de Bourgh learnt her manners.

Just as the play began with the marital trials of Mr and Mrs. Oakly, so it ends with their resolution; it is straight out of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Aided by his military brother's bluff views on how to handle a woman, Mr. Oakly finally asserts his authority in terms that return the play's women to the silence of the patriarchy:

> Mrs. Oakly: Why, You won't let Me speak—
> Oakly: Because You don't speak as You ought—Madam! Madam! You shan't look, nor walk, nor talk, nor think, but as I please. (5.3)

Eighteenth-century actresses had another card up their sleeves, however: the play's epilogue, traditionally spoken by one of the principal women. In this case it was Kitty Clive, the first performer of Lady Freelove, complaining wittily that her "Part's ridiculous—false—out of Nature." Of course this does not counteract the play's basic conservatism, but it does return the audience to the enjoyment of wit from a charismatic woman, a perspective that at least questions the patriarchal platitudes of the play's ending. This is a strategy of compromise with the more liberal part of his audience that is repeated to great effect at the end of Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, when the epilogue is Lady Teazle's, and the author is, interestingly, Colman:

> I, who was late so volatile and gay,
> Like a trade-wind must now blow all one way,
> Bend all my cares, my studies, and my vows,
> To one dull rusty weathercock my spouse!

Sheridan's rival for the crown of leading writer of comedy in the 1780s was Hannah Cowley: *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780) in particular, was second only to *The School for Scandal* in the number of London performances of contemporary mainpiece comedies in the period 1780-1800. For details of the plot of *The Belle's Stratagem* the reader is referred to Melinda Finberg's essay in this volume; suffice it to say that the piece plays almost surreally with identity as a mask to be put on and off according to the social situation. As the play concludes—and the heroine Letitia has brilliantly outwitted her sophisticated lover Doricourt—Letitia voices its subversive view of social identity:

> Letitia: You see, I can be any thing; chuse my character, your taste shall fix it; shall I be an English wife, or breaking at once from the bonds of nature, and education, step forth to the world in all the captivating glare of foreign manners?
> Doricourt: You shall be nothing but yourself; nothing can be captivating that you are not…. (5.5)

This is not really an answer; it's an admission of being dumbfounded. Hazlitt preferred Letitia's charming intriguer to Kate Hardcastle's in *She Stoops to Conquer*, and he was properly appreciative of the quintessentially theatrical quality of this role:

> The part of Letitia Hardy is indeed one that is expressly calculated to display the various talents and accomplishments of a young actress; it passes from the highest brilliancy of fashionable manners to the most awkward and mawkish rusticity;—she dances, she sings, she romps, is grave and gay… studiously calls forth her powers both of attraction and repulsion; and by the multiplicity of changes and aspects she assumes to effect her whimsical and hazardous purpose, dazzles the audience…[17]

Letitia, in short, embodies a dangerous and unpredictable femininity, consciously theatrical, a model that has undermined the conservative teleology of romantic comedy since the gender-bending masquerades of Shakespeare's Rosalind.[18] Cowley's Letitia may spout pieties about marriage and true love, but her role in the courtship is educative of her proposed husband, the very opposite of the preferred Victorian model of the passive-receptive young woman. This tendency is seen even more strongly in Cowley's later plays, *Which is the Man?* (1782) and *More Ways than One* (1783). It is significant that neither was as popular (though revived successfully for some years after their first seasons) as *The Belle's Stratagem.* Letitia, is, after all, a nice virgin who knows what she wants; the widow Lady Bell Bloomer of *Which is the Man?* does not even know her own mind until the last few minutes of the play. Lady Bell's unruliness and apparent amorality provide a strong model for the transgressive but charming Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park*; both ladies use wit and role-playing to the point of being indelicate, and find themselves reluctant to acknowledge their preference for a plain man over shallow sophisticates.[19] Angela Smallwood comments interestingly in her essay that Cowley "was perhaps foremost in recognising how the cultural dynamism of female performance might radicalise comedy's conformist images of women."[20] But this period of liberal success was short, as the history of drama at the end of the century makes clear.

The other major theatrical genre, tragedy, had continued to provide images of suffering femininity for a succession of fine actresses, though the records indicate that these plays were less popular than the contemporary comedies. The central female roles of the newer tragedies (Home's *Douglas* (1757), More's *Percy* (1777))—still always fewer in number than the male roles—were "eloquent" in a way that was as much to do with bodily performance as verbal ability (though there were plenty of long speeches for these tragic figures; the influence of French tragedy