Made in the Media:
Actresses, Celebrity and the Periodical Press in the Late Eighteenth Century



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Abstract

This thesis examines the periodical culture that operated in late eighteenth-century Britain (predominantly though not exclusively in London) and the ways in which it made the female 'stars' of the stage. I propose that actresses' celebrity was in part made in the media; the press coverage they received has not had the same attention as their treatment through other media, such as the memoir or portraiture. Through a combination of literary and cultural analysis, this thesis examines the 'media texts' that circulated in the periodical press about three contemporaneous actresses: Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Farren and Mary Wells.

Three central questions drive this thesis. What role did the periodical press play in the development of actresses' celebrity in the late eighteenth century? What rhetorical strategies were used in the newspapers to represent actresses' public identities and how did these verbal images correspond with other media? How did readers and subjects engage with news media as a shared space for shaping celebrity identities?

In exploring answers to these questions this work aims to contribute to the ongoing re-evaluation of the centrality of media in early celebrity and to an understanding of the daily, weekly and monthly circulation of motifs that created and sustained celebrity identities. It also makes the case that an emergent celebrity culture in this period was shaped in and through an exploration of gendered (female) performance and the limits of its agency.

Part I describes the media landscape in relation to the stage. Chapter 1 describes the ways in which the stage represented newspapers and their reception. Chapter 2 turns to the ways in which newspapers represented the stage. Part II offers case studies. Chapter 3 argues that the press treated ambivalently Sarah Siddons's background as a stroller. Chapter 4 focuses on the kind of 'credit' newspapers accorded Elizabeth Farren's portrayal of the character of the 'lady' on and off stage. And Chapter 5 demonstrates that, despite her close association with newspapers, Mary Wells failed to secure the kind of celebrity she craved through the press.

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Textual Note

Many eighteenth-century newspapers had a main title and subtitle; I have chosen to use the main titles throughout as subtitles were often dropped or altered over time. Where a subtitle is of particular importance or worthy of note I have drawn attention to it.

Unless otherwise stated, use of italics, small capitals or other printed forms of emphasis in quotations are from the original texts. I have retained original spellings, but I have modernised the long ſ to the short s to aid readability.

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PROLOGUE: CELEBRITY MATTERS

This thesis examines the early periodical culture that operated in eighteenth-century Britain (predominantly though not exclusively in London) and the ways in which it made the female 'stars' of the stage. Using a combination of literary and cultural analysis I examine the 'media texts' that circulated and played a direct role in celebrity-making. I propose that actresses' celebrity was in part made in the media, though the kinds of press coverage they received has been underexplored compared to other kinds of material, such as the memoir or portraiture. I explore the interactivity between the press and the playhouse and pay close attention to particular recurring images that appear in actresses' media representation.

The genesis for this thesis began with a visit to an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2011, 'First Actresses: Nell Gwynn to Sarah Siddons'. Faced with those 'First Actresses' who, armed only with their images, punctured through the centuries and reached out to modernity, I was interested in what *they did* or what was special about who *they were* to achieve such unequivocal interest. As my research progressed, the centrality of the periodical press became clear, yet compared with other aspects of celebrity it has been underexplored.

Three central questions drive this thesis. What role did the periodical press play in the development of actresses' celebrity in the late eighteenth century? What rhetorical strategies were used in the newspapers to represent actresses' public identities and how did these verbal images correspond with other media? How did readers and subjects engage with news media as a shared space for shaping celebrity identities? In exploring answers to these questions this work contributes to a rich field within eighteenth-century celebrity studies, theatre research and cultural and literary analysis of the newspapers. My thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing re-evaluation of the centrality of media in early celebrity and to an understanding of the daily, weekly and monthly circulation of motifs that supported celebrity identities.

In this Prologue, I introduce and assess the histories of celebrity, the periodical press and the actress in the eighteenth century, explain the contribution this thesis offers to all three areas, and make the case for the significance of their interaction.

AGE OF CELEBRITY

Fame is not new, but celebrity seems to be. Leo Braudy traces the history of fame back to antiquity in his ground-breaking *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (1986).[1] But this heroic, long-lasting fame – the kind attained first, Braudy suggests, by Alexander the Great – differs from the (potentially) fleeting fame based more on personality than on deeds. The modern famous person is, as Daniel J. Boorstin pithily puts it, 'known for his well-knownness'.[2] The celebrity, as Joseph Roach observes, has 'It'.[3] The ambiguity about what 'It' constitutes evinces the ephemerality of celebrity: instead of doing something, simply being is enough to become a celebrity.

This ephemeral fame has been characterised as a feature of modernity. For both sociologist Chris Rojek and film critic Richard Schickel celebrity is inextricably linked to the rise of mass-media technologies in the twentieth century.[4] I disagree: before the development of photographic and moving-image technologies, the eighteenth-century periodical press ushered in the 'Age of Celebrity'. The culture of celebrity and its attendant media system, albeit not of an equivalent scale or speed, were in place by the end of the eighteenth century, the moment in which Braudy claims 'recognisably modern' fame first appears.[5] In his important study on the Hollywood star system, Richard Dyer writes that 'stars are images in media texts,

[1] Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 7.
[2] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 57.
[3] Joseph R. Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 1-12.
[4] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Press, 2001), p. 16; Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), p. 23.
[5] Braudy, p. 7.

and as such are products of Hollywood (or whatever)'.[6] It is Dyer's 'whatever' that leaves space to consider the kinds of celebrity 'media texts' that circulated pre-Hollywood, pre-twentieth century and pre-photography in the eighteenth-century periodical press.

Beyond a general consensus that some kind of media is required for celebrity to emerge, there is little else in agreement. Conceptualising different categories of fame, what Graeme Turner calls the 'taxonomies of fame', appears to preoccupy cultural theorists.[7] This is not altogether unhelpful; as Antoine Lilti states in his brilliant study, *The Invention of Celebrity* (2017), celebrity 'cannot be reduced to the simple fact of being very well known. There are too many ways of being well known'.[8] There remains, however, little consensus not only of meanings (and origins) but also of the categories themselves. Lilti argues that glory, reputation and celebrity are different 'forms of notoriety', whilst Chris Rojek maintains that 'a distinction should be made between celebrity, notoriety and renown'.[9]

The preoccupation with taxonomy is not new, and neither is the idea that celebrity is somewhat inferior, as these lines, from the *Lady's Magazine* (July 1794), on the various kinds of publicity suggest:

> FAME, RENOWN, REPUTATION, CELEBRITY, NOTORIETY
> These rational objects of turbulent desire, these words which have prompted so many actions good and bad, are not, though all delightful, exactly synonymous.[10]

Here we can observe some of the anxieties surrounding this emerging culture: public figures were (and still are) celebrated in different ways and for different reasons and this required a

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[6] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), p. 10.
[7] Turner outlines the various kinds of categories in *Understanding Celebrity* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), pp. 23-26.
[8] Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity: 1750-1850*, trans. by Lynn Jeffress (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), pp. 4-5.
[9] Lilti, pp. 5-8, 86-108; Rojek, p. 12. See also Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody on notoriety in 'Introduction: The Singularity of Theatrical Celebrity', in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000,* ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-11 (pp. 6-7).
[10] *The Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to their Use and Amusement*, vol. 25 (July 1794), p. 351.

new vocabulary. This sliding scale of value presents celebrity as 'of a weaker degree of strength, and narrower in extent' than fame, closer to the socially dubious 'notoriety'.[11] Though this attitude often still prevails, it was by no means the only conception; both Claire Brock and Brian Cowan draw attention to contemporary debates on whether contemporaneous or posthumous recognition was superior.[12]

These lines from the *Lady's Magazine* suggest not only that ideas about different kinds of fame were under discussion, but also that the periodical press played a role in staging such debates. Though the modern usage of 'celebrity' is not recorded until the nineteenth century, work by Joseph Roach, Stella Tillyard, Antoine Lilti, Tom Mole, Mary Luckhurst, Jane Moody, and more recently, Emrys Jones and Victoria Joule, has successfully made the case for the presence of celebrity culture in the eighteenth century.[13] Even Chris Rojek, who doubts the emergence of celebrity until 'mass-communications', recognises that his three 'pre-conditions' of celebrity culture (the rise of democracy, the decline of religion and the 'commodification of everyday life') were nascent in the eighteenth-century.[14] My concern here, then, is not to trace the origins of celebrity, but rather to examine the role of the early periodical press – what Brian Cowan calls 'new media' – played in the creation of celebrity identities.[15]

Theatrical celebrity has proved a particularly enduring field of enquiry, no doubt because players' public profession makes them highly visible persons conducive to celebrity.[16] The very public nature of players, known by and through their appearances, distinguishes them

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Claire Brock, *The Feminization of Fame, 1750-1830* (Basingstoke, England and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 168-75; Brian Cowan, 'News, Biography, and Eighteenth-Century Celebrity', in *Oxford Handbooks Online* (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-29 (pp. 5-6).
[13] 'celebrity, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29424?redirectedFrom=celebrity&> [accessed 3 December 2018]
Roach, *It*, p. 1-3; Lilti, p. 7; Stella Tillyard, 'Celebrity in 18th-Century London', *History Today,* 55 (6 June 2005), 20-27 (p. 22); Tom Mole, ed. *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Luckhurst and Moody, p. 3; Emrys Jones and Victoria Joule, *Intimacy and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture: Public Interiors* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 1.
[14] Rojek, p. 9.
[15] Cowan, p. 3.
[16] Luckhurst and Moody, pp. 1-2, 10.

from other types of celebrity, such as artists or writers, who are known for their works (independent of their physical person). I concentrate on actresses' celebrity in particular because the story of the rise of 'new media' is entwined with the rise of the professional actress, who first appeared on the stage following the Restoration. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, burgeoning news culture transformed the stage and its reception: from the early eighteenth century the newspapers began to advertise, review, and comment on theatre culture, often paying particular attention to its female stars. The 'Actress', then, is not incidental, but vital, to this story; she came into being alongside the growth of new technologies for the mass-circulation of ideas, images, objects and print.

Two things happened to news culture in the eighteenth century that were fundamental to turning actresses into modern celebrities: first, the periodical press became a means of circulating information; and second, from around mid-century, information about 'personalities' began to constitute news. By and large the study of eighteenth-century celebrity has remained, however, focused on its materials, rather than its structures, though Tom Mole goes some way to explore its 'apparatus', as does David Worrall, who integrates celebrity into his application of social assemblage theory to eighteenth-century stage history.[17] It is over a decade since Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody defined celebrity as a 'concept which focuses attention on the interplay between individuals and institutions, markets and media'.[18] And yet, until recently, a thorough examination of eighteenth-century news media and theatrical celebrity has been conspicuously absent.

The most sustained treatment of eighteenth-century celebrity often focuses on memoirs and portraiture. Cheryl Wanko, Kristina Straub and Julia Fawcett pay close attention to 'autobiographical performances'.[19] Fawcett's concept of 'overexpression' – a kind of hiding in

[17] Mole ed., *Romanticism*; David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[18] Luckhurst and Moody, p. 1.
[19] Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock:

plain sight – has been particularly influential for thinking about ways in which celebrities could 'maintain control' over their identity. She proposes that eighteenth-century celebrities could disappear behind an 'impossibly excessive and spectacular' public persona to hide the 'self' from public gaze.[20] Overexpression therefore is a kind of palimpsest of textual and embodied performance in which endless writing-over obscures the 'real' whilst seemingly presenting the 'truth': the celebrity only appears to be known or knowable.

Art too has been central to investigations of eighteenth-century celebrity; important studies by Robyn Asleson, Heather McPherson, Gill Perry, and Shearer West evince the particular importance of visual culture to the theatre and theatrical celebrity during the period.[21] The growth of the British art scene and exhibition culture, the 'cult of personalities', and a thriving commercial culture contributed to the predominance of portraiture, which was afforded even greater reach through the circulation of cheaper prints. There was also a thriving market for goods, such as chess sets, tiles, and statuettes, bearing actresses' images.[22]

The scrutiny applied to actor memoirs and portraiture has not been paid to the periodical press, perhaps because it is not considered an 'art' or a personal expression of the celebrity, but rather an industry. Memoirs claim to be either by a performer or others close to them; performers sit for the portraits that shape their celebrity image. Memoirs are by definition composed after the height of fame, subject to memorial lapses and both accidental and

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Texas Tech University Press, 2003); Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Julia H. Fawcett, *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696-1801* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

[20] Fawcett, pp. 1, 3-4.

[21] Robyn Asleson ed. *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999); Robyn Asleson ed. *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812* (New Haven, Conn.: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Yale Center for British Art by Yale University Press, 2003); Heather McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017); Gillian Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre, 1768-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2007); Gillian Perry, Joseph R. Roach, and Shearer West, *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Shearer West, *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (Pinter Publishers: London, 1991).

[22] Heather McPherson, 'Marketing Celebrity: Porcelain and Theatrical Display', in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain,* ed. by Alden Cavanagh and Michael Elia Yonan (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 87-106.

intentional revision: memoir is the endgame of self-promotion, which attempts to provide a coherent identity. Similarly, portraiture, though not exactly retrospective, is intended to outlive the sitter and might be seen to offer a more stable, or streamlined, identity than that presented in the newspapers.

The verbal images of celebrities in periodicals deserve investigation too, not least because contemporary news media provides an account of celebrity-making in the present moment. The periodical press encompasses a 'diverse but contiguous group' of forms, grouped together by daily, weekly, monthly or even yearly publication.[23] The daily newspaper and monthly magazine feature most heavily here, because it is regular media attention that is a hallmark of celebrity. Shearer West assesses 'verbal representations' of players alongside visual ones in her foundational study *The Image of the Actor* (1991). However, she collapses the distinctions between different forms of print: 'despite their different tones, newspapers and pamphlets and books were all addressing the same audience, and their messages were often the same'.[24] This thesis proceeds from an alternative perspective: though related to other visual and verbal mediums, the periodical press is a distinct form that requires to be assessed on its own terms.

Although it privileges different material, my work is richly informed by the research into memoirs and portraiture, not least because these modes of celebrity representation evince the public's interest in personalities and willingness to buy works by or about that person. There is much correspondence between the mediums too; advertisements and reviews of memoirs and exhibitions, as well as gossip about actresses sitting for portraits frequently appear in the press, and, though newspapers did not feature images until the nineteenth-century, magazines

[23] Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell, 'Introduction: Women and the Birth of Periodical Culture', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s*, ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1-19 (p. 8).
[24] West, p. 8.

did include prints of actresses.[25] Portraiture's corresponding form, the graphic satire, often corrupts or plays with the image created in 'legitimate' (or 'high') art. But graphic satire is also in dialogue with the periodical press. David Francis Taylor tells us, for example, that the political graphic satire *Gloria Mundi* 'takes up a hint first expressed in the pro-Shelburne *Morning Herald*'.[26] In turn, newspapers, news reading and news editors are the subjects of some visual satires.[27]

Like the periodical press, graphic satirists became more interested in the theatre and theatrical personalities (particularly actresses with scandalous personal lives) from the 1770s onwards.[28] Yet often the specific links to particular news stories are underexplored. In part this is due to the experience of the archive; satirical prints housed together encourage comparison with each other by creator, theme or subject rather than with materials in other genres treating the same subject matter such as those printed in newspapers. My approach to reading the images is informed by the work of David Bindman, who urges investigation into the verbal features of satiric prints; David Francis Taylor, who examines their 'literariness'; and Cindy McCreery, who acknowledges their overlap with the press, when she says that '[s]atirical prints also responded to newspaper and magazine accounts of women'.[29]

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[25] Visual images of actresses appeared in several magazines including the *Town and Country Magazine, Lady's Magazine*, and the *Monthly Mirror*. For a small study on miniatures in magazines see, Laura Engel, 'Magazine Miniatures: Portraits of Actresses, Princes, and Queens in Late Eighteenth-Century Periodicals', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s,* ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 426-39.

[26] David Francis Taylor, *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature, 1760-1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 152.

[27] Editors Henry Bate, William Jackson and William Woodfall appear in Thomas Rowlandson, *The loves of the fox and the badger, - or the coalition wedding*, *world* (BMSat 6369), 20 January 1787, hand-coloured etching on paper, 22.4 × 32.5 cm, British Museum, London; Editor of the *World*, Edward Topham, is depicted as Atlas with the world on his shoulders in James Hook, *The modern Atlas. Or man of the world* (BMSat 7210), 20 January 1787, hand-coloured etching on paper, 33.2 × 19.8 cm, British Museum, London; concerns about misreading newspapers are expressed in F. Sansom (after George Moutard Woodward), *Cross Readings* (BMSat undescribed), 1 November 1800, hand-coloured etching on paper, 34.6 × 46.8 cm, British Museum, London. See Frederic George Stephens and Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1870-1954). Further BMSat references refer to this volume.

[28] McPherson, *Art and Celebrity*, p. 131.

[29] David Bindman, 'Texts as Design in Gillray's Caricature', in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality,* ed. by Peter Wagner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 309-23; Taylor, *Politics of Parody*, see esp. ch. 1, 'The Literariness of Graphic Satire', pp. 1-39; Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late*

My analysis of verbal print media is, then, in dialogue with these studies of other methods of celebrity-making. Indeed, this thesis recognises throughout the independence and the interdependence between mediums. In Chapter 4, I investigate this in more detail in relation to news stories and graphic satire about Elizabeth Farren and in Chapter 5 I examine Mary Wells's uses of the press in the construction of her memoir. In so doing, I deploy Jacky Bratton's concept of 'intertheatricality', which has proved instructive here in that it 'seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users'.[30] In particular, I focus on the 'connections' presented and mediated by the press, which conditioned the reception to actresses (both on and off-stage).

Also important to this thesis are two other concepts developed by historians and theorists of theatre: Joseph Roach's theory of 'surrogation' or 'how culture reproduces and re-creates itself', and Marvin Carlson's concept of 'ghosting' in which reception is haunted by memories of other performances (of the same play, the same actor, the same part).[31] I draw on both these ideas: I suggest that the newspaper facilitated both the processes of surrogation and ghosting by 'remembering' on behalf of the wider public, as a kind of cultural memory bank, even when neither the writer nor the reader would remember the 'original' performance, helping to transmit ideas about players and performance through time.

Periodical print media occupies an ambiguous position between the ephemeral and the enduring; newspaper reviews outlive theatrical performance, but they are not necessarily expected to be kept in the same way as a book or piece of art. What is written one day might be contradicted the next with the new paper that not only contests the previous report but also

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Eighteenth-Century England (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 9. See also Daniel O'Quinn's discussion of graphic satires and the Hastings Trial in *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), ch. 4, 'The Raree Show of Impeachment', pp. 164-221.

[30] J. S. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 36-38.

[31] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 2; Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 52-95.

replaces the previous number physically: yesterday's paper is old news. Newspapers and magazines in particular tend to be saved by accident rather than design. They offer contemporaneous evidence of celebrity-making, rather than the retrospective accounts found in other material such as theatrical biography. This means that the celebrity identities presented in periodicals can be highly unstable, with conflicting images presented from number to number (sometimes within the same one).

INVESTIGATING THE NEWS

Jürgen Habermas proposed the centrality of the burgeoning periodical press to the broadening of the public sphere.[32] His model has been much critiqued, not least his too rigid boundaries between public/private spheres, and the absence of recognition of women's participation.[33] Nevertheless I follow Gillian Russell in thinking that it is 'not yet time to jettison his concept of the public sphere'.[34] Yes, Habermas unhelpfully divides public and private, and does not account for women's public role, but he established the case for the centrality of periodical culture to eighteenth-century public life (and beyond) which remains important. His grounding insight informs the argument of this thesis.

Most research into eighteenth-century periodical culture takes into account the ways in which the press encouraged participation in public life. In literary studies this has meant a focus on essay periodicals, such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, which comment on and critique culture and society.[35] Historical studies of the periodical focus instead predominantly

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[32] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
[33] Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal,* 36 (1993), 383-414.
[34] Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.
[35] Manushag N. Powell, *Performing Authorship in Eighteenth-Century English Periodicals* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2012).

on the newspapers' political history and public engagement with civic concerns.[36] Celebrity cannot be divorced from the press's role in the development of the public sphere; it is not a *thing* but rather a structure – not a counter-culture but enmeshed within culture. Yet within eighteenth-century celebrity studies there has been largely only tacit acknowledgement that print media played a part in the emergence of celebrity, but little concentrated investigation.[37]

Research by Brian Cowan, Antoine Lilti, and Stella Tillyard, however, has begun to investigate the press's role in the emergence of celebrity culture.[38] Stuart Sherman's work on David Garrick proposes that he is the first media celebrity, whilst Ruth Scobie's research on 'Mrs Grieve' draws attention to the kind of 'print celebrity' available through the newspapers.[39] These preliminary studies on news culture and celebrity invite further investigation. This thesis answers their call. I consider the periodical press as a site of publicity and look specifically at the theatrical news; in so doing, this thesis offers new perspectives on the formation of actresses' celebrity in the eighteenth century.

The interdependence of the stage and the press has often been overlooked, with periodicals frequently cited only as a source of relatively uncomplicated evidence of, for example, details of performances, or the development of theatrical criticism. Recent work in eighteenth-century theatre studies revises this position by paying new attention to the symbiosis of press and playhouse. Gillian Russell's *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (2007) and Daniel O'Quinn's *Entertaining Crisis* (2011) provide good starting points for

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[36] Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 107; Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987); Lucyle Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press, 1772-1792* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1963).

[37] See, for example, Heather McPherson, 'Siddons Rediviva: Death, Memory and Theatrical Afterlife', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850,* ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 120-40 (p. 121).

[38] Cowan, pp. 7-12; Lilti, pp. 50-52, 67-73; Tillyard, pp. 23-26.

[39] Stuart Sherman, 'Garrick among Media: The "Now Performer" Navigates the News', *PMLA,* 126 (2011), 966-82; Ruth Scobie, 'Foote, Fox, and the Mysterious Mrs Grieve: Print Celebrity and Imposture', in *Intimacy and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture: Public Interiors,* ed. by Emrys Jones and Victoria Joule (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 233-56.

attending to the twinned roles of press and playhouse as social, cultural and political mediators.[40] Though neither are primarily concerned with celebrity, their assessments of the publicity of periodical culture, its relationship with the stage and their shared rhetorical strategies inform my work. O'Quinn's thoughtful consideration of news-reading as entertainment, as well as for information, in particular informs my interpretative strategy.[41]

But who was reading? At an average cost of 1d at the start of the century (rising to 3½d. in 1797) Jeremy Black argues that newspapers were 'an expensive product…outside the pockets of many workers'.[42] Though Hannah Black cautions that evidence is patchy, she estimates 'total sales of daily newspapers at between 15,000 and 20,000 copies per day' during the 1780s.[43] As Barker and others remind us, however, several people could share a single paper, whether in public places such as the coffee house, at home or amongst friends and neighbours.[44] Of course we cannot know *what* people were interested in reading or closely followed; in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) Mr. Price borrows (and returns) a newspaper from a neighbour, but we do not know whether he is interested in the theatrical news.[45] Whilst estimating news reading is difficult, it outstripped theatre attendance over the same period, estimated to be around 1,500 people a night at Drury Lane and Covent Garden from 1775.[46] For some, therefore, engagement with the playhouse and its players occurred largely – if not solely – through the press. In fact, the expansion of the periodical press gave virtual access to cultural, social, and political life to the reading public like never before.

Gillian Russell claims that news about fashionable circles left them 'more open to

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[40] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*; Daniel O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium, 1770-1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
[41] O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, pp. 1-4.
[42] Black, pp. 106-7.
[43] Barker, p. 23.
[44] Black, pp. 106-7; Barker, p. 24; Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 174.
[45] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. by John Wiltshire, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*, ed. by Janet M. Todd, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), III, p. 441, 444.
[46] Charles Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage, 1776-1800: A Critical Introduction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. ccix-ccx.

scrutiny' and Daniel O'Quinn suggests that contemporary readers were skilled enough to 'navigate the world of signs' that made up eighteenth-century newswriting.[47] Certainly, contemporary evidence, such as Mr. Puff's forensic analysis of types of puff in Richard Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779), indicates that at least some members of the public were alert to the rhetorical strategies used in the press. A certain level of knowledge, beyond basic literacy, was a pre-requisite.[48] I discuss Sheridan's satire on news culture in more detail in Chapter 1, but for now it is worth asking: what are we to make of puffs when it is clear that they were readily understood as such (at least by some) and not taken seriously? We might then assume that readers were alert to the 'puff' as a distinct kind of writing – and it was not necessarily mistaken for 'real' news. And yet surely the loaded cultural and social references in news writing about theatre were not accessible to all readers?

Research into the audience for graphic satires might be useful here for thinking about newspaper readership. David Francis Taylor outlines conflicting ideas on whether graphic satire was a 'popular' and 'democratizing' form, or whether it was intended for a more select audience, not only because of prohibitive prices (far more than that of a newspaper), but also because the images are loaded with complex webs of allusions and references meaning that many people would not have the cultural capital to 'read' the image fully.[49] I am persuaded by both Taylor and Eirwen Nicholson of the latter; as Taylor puts it: 'The Enlightenment's embrace of "everyone," the literariness of graphic satire reminds us, rarely embraces everyone.[50] I do not suggest that news readership was quite so exclusive, but it is certainly not a form for 'everyone': the newspapers were packed full with dense allusions and references which would not necessarily have been readily legible to all.

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[47] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 15. O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, p. 6.
[48] Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic*, ed. by David Crane (London: A & C Black, 1989)., II.1. l. 171-78, p.35.
[49] David Francis Taylor, 'The Practice of Caricature in 18th-Century Britain', *Literature Compass,* 14 (2017) (pp. 4-5).
[50] Eirwen Nicholson, 'Consumers and Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in Eighteenth-Century England', *History,* 81 (1996), 5-21, see esp. pp. 8-18; Taylor, *Politics of Parody*, pp. 24-39.

A tension therefore exists in press writing about actresses; repeated language and motifs suggest accessibility, but we also find more obscure references that might only entertain or be meaningful to those already in the know. One method of resolving the tension here is to think about the newspapers as not unlike a theatre auditorium; editors negotiated the different publics similar to the prologues and epilogues that address the pit, boxes and gallery in turn.

In their joint special edition of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* entitled 'Georgian Theatre in an Information Age: Media, Performance, Sociability', Russell and O'Quinn set out to 'orient future research on the complex intermediate relations endemic to theatrical culture'.[51] It is in the light of this foundational research, and the work by the other contributors in it, that this thesis should be understood. They assert:

> Understanding the transit back and forth between performance and print is thus vital, requiring a continual engagement with questions of remediation and reception. The theatre cannot be considered in isolation but must be explored in relation to other forms of cultural expression and contingent social and political stages.[52]

The media acted as a powerful intermediary between the stage and audience shaping and informing the reception of plays and players: re-assessment of the interrelation between the theatre and the media is necessary for more fruitful discussion of wider eighteenth-century celebrity. In this thesis the emphasis is on the cultural dialogue between the media, theatre and audience around the figure of the actress, rather than perceiving each as a distinct sphere that developed independently. Following in the footsteps of those who have made preliminary research in this field, this thesis reappraises the role print media played in the making and breaking of celebrity identities.

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[51] Daniel O'Quinn and Gillian Russell, 'Introduction', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction,* 27.3-4 (Spring and Summer 2015), 337-40 (p. 337).
[52] Ibid., p. 338.

ENTER THE ACTRESS

The 'actress' has been the subject of numerous major studies over the past thirty years. These include trans-historical perspectives (Sandra Richards and Kirsten Pullen), methodological approaches (Maggie B. Gale, Viv Gardner, Jacky Bratton), and period-based studies into actresses of the Restoration (Elizabeth Howe and Gilli Bush-Bailey), eighteenth century (Felicity Nussbaum, Laura Engel, Helen Brooks, Laura Rosenthal), and nineteenth century (Tracy C. Davis and Sophie Duncan).[53] These period studies trace a line between generations of actresses, to extrapolate a female theatrical tradition that disrupts the dominant androcentric histories (Betterton-Cibber-Quin-Garrick-Kean-Irving-Olivier).

As well as revealing the quality of actresses' stagecraft and their roles in shaping the repertoire, the work on eighteenth-century actresses has recuperated their identities beyond the 'whore' to reveal professionals, economic agents, divas, muses, and authors.[54] The variety, depth and scope of scholarship to date allows us to understand how actresses operated and to think about them as professional women. Persuasive theories put forward by Helen Brooks ('techniques of sincerity') and Laura Engel ('self-fashioning strategies') demonstrate actresses'

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[53] Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Maggie B. Gale and Vivien Gardner, *Women, Theatre, and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Bratton; Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); *Treading the Bawds: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011); Helen E. M. Brooks, *Actresses, Gender, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Laura J. Rosenthal, 'Entertaining Women: The Actress in Eighteenth-Century Theatre and Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730–1830,* ed. by Daniel O'Quinn and Jane Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 159-74; Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991); Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare's Women and the Fin De Siecle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[54] For an overview of 'actress studies' see Laura Engel, 'Stage Beauties: Actresses and Celebrity Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century', *Literature Compass,* 13.12 (December 2016), 749-61; Nussbaum., *Rival Queens*; Brooks, *Playing Women*; Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr ed. *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660-1830* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2014); Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*; Asleson ed. *Notorious Muse*.

agency and activity in making and maintaining their own public image through performances of authenticity.[55] Of course, no scholar suggests that any actress had total control. Engel notes that actresses only had 'some agency' because 'their personas were fashioned in many ways already for them by the tastes, desires, and anxieties of eighteenth-century audiences'.[56] Nonetheless, the media's role in shaping and conditioning those 'tastes, desires, and anxieties' and mediating the actresses' use of them has received less attention than the ways actresses navigated them. Even Claire Brock and Julia Fawcett's influential assessments of Mary Robinson's engagement with the press (the only eighteenth-century actress to receive such treatment), focus on Robinson's active role in utilizing and directing her press coverage.[57] What I set out to do here is to investigate the role of the press in actresses' celebrity-making during the eighteenth century, and to re-orient celebrity studies' focus on to the news media superstructure that underpinned it.

My account of celebrity-making in the periodical press builds upon formative ideas conceived by Joseph Roach and Felicity Nussbaum. Their respective theories of 'public intimacy' and the 'interiority effect' reveal that creating an 'illusion' of intimacy is central to the actress-audience relationship.[58] Press coverage is one means of manufacturing that illusion – and it did so in order to sell newspapers. Newspaper coverage could enable the feeling of 'closeness' to a player in the auditorium to be extended or replicated offstage. Daniel O'Quinn suggests that the press developed 'technologies of intimacy', through which readers could 'fantasize' about access to people and events they would ordinarily be excluded from.[59] Press accounts of actresses' off-stage activities give the impression of intimate access for the reader, a sense that the celebrity is known to them. The press positions itself as crucial intermediary

[55] Brooks, *Playing Women*, p. 14; Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p. 21.
[56] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p. 3.
[57] Brock, pp. 77-108; Fawcett, pp. 197-203.
[58] Roach, *It*, p. 3. Nussbaum, pp. 20-21.
[59] O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, p. 65.

between actress and public: read another newspaper to sustain the fantasy. The textual figure is, of course, not the same as the physical person, but it is a convincing substitute in their absence. In fact, personal encounters might reveal the true distance between oneself and a celebrity. The myth of intimacy may indeed be more easily upheld by reading about an actress in the paper: imagination fills the gap.

A major contributor to the creation of public identities was what Jane Moody calls 'the rise of paragraph journalism'; that is, the widespread practice of inserting promotional 'puffs' or scurrilous gossip into newspapers.[60] I will discuss the development of paragraph culture in more detail in Chapter 2. For our purposes here, it is important to note that one means by which actresses could 'self-fashion' their public image was to place promotional paragraphs into newspapers. But so could someone else: by the mid-1780s the newspapers were open (for a fee) to anyone to submit a paragraph.[61] Added this is the fact that most paragraphs were submitted anonymously and were often republished in another paper. Tracing authorship is therefore difficult. Whilst the cost obviously prohibited some people from inserting paragraphs, it remains that readers (and rivals) played an active part of news-making, both to the advantage and disadvantage of celebrities, and gives a whole new dimension to the idea of periodicals as 'public prints'.

Of course, editors did not publish all submissions; their selections were made for a variety of reasons including quality, political stance and entertainment value, as well as bribery.[62] Lucyle Werkmeister suggests that criticism of theatrical personalities was common in part because 'the managers were willing to pay for silence if the abuse was continued long enough'.[63] For actresses, being visible was important and even bad press, as we shall see, could

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[60] Jane Moody, 'Stolen Identities: Character, Mimicry and the Invention of Samuel Foote', in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000,* ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 65-89 (p. 73); Brock, pp. 10-12.
[61] Werkmeister, p. 7.
[62] Scobie, pp. 237-38.
[63] Werkmeister, p. 7.

be useful, sometimes at least. Nevertheless, some actresses might have wielded enough power (or had enough money) to silence attacks, but not every time, and not with every editor in every paper. I do not contest the idea that actresses played a part in shaping their public persona, but I do resist the implication that actresses were the sole agents of their success – or lack of success. In short, whilst actresses might attempt to direct their public image, there is no meaningful sense in which they could control it.

Taking a wider view, it is difficult to determine agency or to measure it; the 'I' in memoirs and other writings often mask the other agents (individuals or institutions) involved. Moreover, ability to shape one's public image might fluctuate over time. Claire Brock's distinction, therefore, between those who are 'thrust into the public glare, unwilling and unable to take advantage of this position' and those who 'actively capitalize upon one's place under the glare of media attention' is somewhat unhelpful.[64] Multiple stories about actresses circulated in the press during their lifetimes, and it is these stories – conflicting, multivalent and mutable – that I discuss here.

This thesis has been completed in the wake of the Hollywood sex scandals in 2017. It has become very clear that the conditions underpinning an actress's success might not be the uncomplicated story of a woman with 'It'. The narrative of 'agency' does not account for the more troubling aspects of celebrity: particularly for women, particularly concerning the media. To be a celebrity is to be under intense personal scrutiny; the body, sexual relationships, and personal space are all on display to the masses. So much so that celebrity is recognised as harmful: both to the celebrity and their publics. Moreover, concentrating on what individuals achieved, the attribution of 'agency' to the actress does not address why some women, despite their best efforts, cannot penetrate the celebrity system. Without proper assessment of the media we will not be able to fully explain why some actresses *fail* at becoming celebrities – despite

[64] Brock, p. 10.

their agency and their talent.

Whilst I do not doubt that actresses exercised some agency, I think its extent is in the end unmeasurable. Questions about agency have been fundamental to feminist scholarship over the past three decades: what constitutes agency? To what extent do individuals have autonomy to act? and can agency ever be understood without reference to – or as beyond – external forces? Judith Butler's work is a useful starting point in thinking about answers to these questions.[65] In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler addresses the central problem of whether it is possible to have agency within a socially prescribed world:

> If my doing is dependent on what is done to me or, rather, the ways in which I am done by norms, then the possibility of my persistence as an "I" depends upon my being able to do something with what is done with me. This does not mean that I can remake the world so that I become its maker. That fantasy of godlike power only refuses the ways we are constituted, invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside of us. My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution.[66]

It is this concept of agency, which demands that agency and empowerment must be understood in relation to external forces, that influences my thinking here. For eighteenth-century actresses that 'condition' must, in part, be the media system that could both promote and destroy their reputations.

In this study, my approach to agency is twofold; first, I remain sceptical that celebrity *is* in fact a means by which women gain power. In fact, by presenting it as somehow 'empowering' we risk ignoring its problems. Second, even if we accept that some women successfully act to become celebrities, our understanding of those acts must be in relation to wider structures like the media. In short, the autonomy to act in a certain way is only part of the story. The shortcomings of the formulation of 'agency' in our understanding of celebrity –

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[65] Kathy Dow Magnus usefully charts Butler's shifting philosophy on agency in 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency', *Hypatia,* 21 (2006), 81-103.
[66] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

has also been noted by Tom Mole. His edited collection de-centres the individual and attends to the 'apparatus' underpinning celebrity in an 'effort to move beyond biographical approaches which mystify agency'.[67] I do, however, use a personality-centred approach in Part II because celebrity is about intense interest in individuals. Where I depart from previous studies is by re-orienting attention to the press *about* them, rather than assessing the strategies for publicity employed *by* them.

In my own work, which reframes biography in order to question the extent of women's agency within a media-dominated culture, I am influenced by Gilli Bush-Bailey's warning against the 'valorisation of the individual':

> In our desire to identify our new-found heroines we have reinforced the traditional model of the artist or poet as divergent from the society in which she works, rather than a product of it. This particularly male imagery works to undermine the impact of writing and performing women in that it identifies them as 'different', unique individuals who are not representative of – or to be identified with ordinary, 'normal' women at all.[68]

In short, there is an (unintentional) anti-feminist aspect of attending only to exceptional talent or claiming it is the basis of media success. That is not to undermine actresses' talent, but to complicate it by attending to the other forces that either enabled or hindered them. Some actresses might have been successful at manipulating their publicity, but that can only be understood properly in the context of the broader media. After all, periodicals were not only a stage for actresses to be presented on, but they also reproduced, mediated and challenged that presentation.

Though person-centred, what follows is not biography. Like Felicity Nussbaum, I am interested in the 'fictions that circulated around actresses' lives as they meshed with the

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[67] Tom Mole, 'Introduction', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850,* ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-18 (p. 4).
[68] Bush-Bailey, p. 15.

particular roles that made them famous'. [69] I focus on the kinds of fictions that appeared in the press periodical, but I also consider the ways in which newswriting about actresses informed other genres. I draw upon Kathleen Anderson's assessment of 'Actress Literature', both fictional and real narratives, which 'portray the actress as the heroine of her life's melodrama'.[70] I expand the range of 'actress literature' to encompass other texts that feature in periodicals, not only puff paragraphs, but also poems, dialogues, and occasionally serialised stories to account for the creation of the celebrity persona through print media texts. These verbal images frequently correspond with the images presented on stage, in memoirs and in visual art.

APPROACHES

In the course of researching and writing various cultural and political events have occurred which crystallised many of the concerns attendant on 'celebrity': intense media fascination around celebrities (that includes illegal activity) has resulted in increasing calls for media control (despite the implications for freedom of the press), 'personalities', rather than facts, exert unprecedented control over popular opinion (with political, medical, and social consequences), and a reality TV star is in the White House. Like Brian Cowan, I resist the inclination to characterise celebrity as 'trivial and ephemeral' compared to other kinds of fame. To take celebrity seriously, particularly assessment of the media, is not a frivolous exercise, but crucial to understanding contemporary social and political relations. To dismiss celebrity actresses as a feature of low-brow sub-culture is not to undermine celebrity, but rather to bolster it: the trick of celebrity is convincing the public that it is insignificant, inert. And yet, I suggest,

[69] Nussbaum, p. 10.
[70] Kathleen Anderson, 'Frances Burney's *The Wanderer*: Actress as Virtuous Deceiver', *European Romantic Review,* 10 (1999), 424-51 (p. 433).

celebrity is the governing social structure at the close of the second-decade of the twenty-first century: we live in the Age of Celebrity.

It is worth pausing here to explain some choices that underpin this thesis; first, why focus on actresses alone, and not players more generally; and second, why call them actresses, when it is common practice to call them 'actors' now too. The answers are interlinked: the terms 'actor' and 'actress' are politically, culturally and dramatically loaded; by eliding them we may inadvertently privilege male theatrical traditions over those of their female counterparts. The 'actress' has a distinct history to that of the 'actor'; her professional genealogy made her legal rights, her roles, her social power, her body all different to that of the actor. This thesis therefore follows several feminist theatre scholars in maintaining the terminological distinction of the actress from the actor.[71] In doing so, it recognises that study of 'the actress' offers a particular perspective on celebrity, one, albeit related, unavailable to and different from the 'actor'.

A word on selection. My case studies are familiar figures: Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Farren and Mary Wells. Their careers overlapped (for a few seasons in the 1780s they were all working at Drury Lane), with numerous connections made between them in the media, yet they have distinct presentations in and interactions with the press.

The primary reason for their selection is clear: to revisit the familiar stories of their 'self-fashioning' by examining their interaction with the press. It is my hope that in the future more marginal figures might be explored in terms of their (more limited) press exposure.[72] By examining those who have rich media presence we will be able to map the careers of the kind of actress who warranted attention but did not achieve the level of press coverage necessary to become a celebrity. The organisation of my accounts through case studies follows the approach

[71] Bush-Bailey, Nussbaum, Engel and Brooks all use 'actress', but Shearer West uses 'actor' for both male and female players.
[72] Others too make this call, see Brooks, *Playing Women*, p. 11; Engel, 'Stage Beauties', p. 757.

of several others including Brooks, Engel and Nussbaum; it allows for proper concentration on the unique story of one actress, whilst also enabling comparative readings.

I have chosen actresses who were primarily known for their acting (unlike, for example, Mary Robinson who was also a poet and author) so as to concentrate on texts written about them rather than by them. I do not mean to suggest that they never wrote about themselves (indeed I do discuss Mary Wells's memoir), but I am purposefully avoiding the 'actress as author' concept that has been explored elsewhere.

I have chosen actresses who worked from the 1770s because it was during this decade that the 'gossip', personality-driven, press accelerated. Felicity Nussbaum is critical of the attention paid to Siddons, arguably the most famous, most successful actress of the century, because such work often ignores or obscures the labour of the actresses that came during the century before her, and upon whom her celebrity identity was built.[73] However, from the 1770s, the news media made possible a new kind of fame (that is, celebrity) that was not available to Siddons's predecessors.

Other actresses might also have suited this study; Frances Abington, for example, was at her height of her celebrity in the 1770s, but her career started long before the sustained treatment of actresses in the daily press. So too, actresses like Dora Jordan, who first appeared on the London stage in 1785, appear fractionally too late: the unprecedented success of Siddons from 1782 changed the kinds of publicity, or the potential for publicity, available to actresses: it was possible to be a media star; at the outset of Siddons, Farren and Wells's career, such an idea was only in its infancy.

A different methodological challenge lies in working with the eighteenth-century press archive. I have access to periodicals beyond that of contemporary readers; different readers would have read different papers, over different years, some might have sporadically read,

[73] Nussbaum, p. 280.

others skipped theatrical news altogether. The press archive is at once a vast repository and one that is only partially extant. There are many challenges to navigating it, including missing numbers (some tantalisingly alluded to in other numbers), faded copy, printer errors, untraceable allusions, and mistaken identities (some actresses' names were not uncommon or were used for horses or ships).

Making discriminating choices on what to read and how to trace references has been part of the research process. To find every reference to Siddons, for example, in the newspapers over her thirty-year career is both an impossible task and one that would be unproductive even if possible. I have focused my attention, therefore, on particular moments in actresses' careers, and searched for particular motifs that appear in their press coverage.

The protean nature of the eighteenth-century press must also be accounted for; though some titles existed for extended periods, others only briefly circulated, or the same paper operated under a different name; proprietors and editors (if known) changed hands and contributors were frequently anonymous. Identifying authors is frequently impossible, and whilst this does not preclude actresses inserting paragraphs herself it does not prove it either – in fact it makes authorship a kind of red herring. What is important instead is the fact that certain images circulated in the press, and that some gained traction and contributed to public conceptions of a particular player.

There is limited access to originals; I have sourced much of the evidence in this thesis through digital archives, notably the 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers, Adam Matthew Eighteenth-Century Journals and ProQuest British Periodicals. Put simply, this project would not have been possible prior to digitisation. Access is not the only benefit; ability to search quickly through thousands of newspapers enables quick and various textual comparisons; one reason, perhaps, why comparatively little has been done on the press until recently.

Digital repositories are problematic too; they are unwieldy, have rudimentary search functions, and are only as good as the scans of the original. Robert Hume and Ashley Marshall helpfully outline some of the technological issues with the Burney Collection, particularly with its search function and Optical Character Recognition (OCR), both of which require a mix of idiosyncratic strategies and systematic enquiries to find relevant material.[74] Though I am alert to its errors, the *London Stage, 1660-1800*, has been indispensable for cross-checking information.

What I offer, then, is a study that is both expansive and partial, that explores a large archive but not every source; nevertheless, it is a considerable view of the media representation of this trio of eighteenth-century actresses. The organising principle governing each case study is to structure my analysis around specific moments across the actresses' careers. These snapshots serve to show the shifting representation of actresses over time, in dialogue with their stage work and other visual and verbal texts.

Part I introduces the institutions and characteristics of the actress and the periodical press and the ways in which they achieve a mutual dependency in the eighteenth century. I survey the relationship between print media, the theatre and audiences in the long eighteenth century, and outline the key moments that paved the way for the newspaper to become integral to the making and breaking of celebrity. In Chapter 1 I examine the increasing presence of newspapers and other periodical press in plays and consider what this tells us about the growing presence of news media in cultural life over the century. I then trace the history of news media in England in Chapter 2, paying close attention to the development of theatrical news. This Chapter explores the reading experience of newspapers from the 1770s onwards, detailing the kinds of content, and the rhetorical strategies used to discuss plays and players, before

[74] Ashley Marshall and Robert D. Hume, 'The Joys, Possibilities, and Perils of the British Library's Digital Burney Newspapers Collection', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America,* 104.1 (March 2010), 5-52. See also Batchelor and Powell, pp. 10-12.

illustrating ways in which news language was absorbed into novelistic representations of the theatre.

Part II examines the media celebrity of the three actresses, Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Farren and Mary Wells, through detailed case studies that illuminate their particular interaction with the press. In each I pay close attention to their repertoire and its impact on the kind of representation they achieve in the press. I focus on particular recurring verbal images in their press coverage and assess its influence on and interaction with other mediums (novels, graphic satires, memoirs). Chapter 3 explores Siddons's two attempts to make her name in London; the first spectacularly failed and the second was a spectacular success. I focus in particular on the media attention to her strolling family and investigate the changed response and depiction of that family in 1776 and then 1782. I close by exploring how 'the Siddons' became a quasi-fictional character who appeared in various novels and argue that the early newspapers anticipate her later biographies by forging her posthumous reputation almost at the outset of her career. In fact, we can trace the history of her posthumous reputation to that successful first season.

Chapter 4 considers the media frenzy surrounding Farren, far less known today than Siddons, but considered at the height of her fame a Queen of Comedy at Drury Lane. I explore two fundamental strands of her print celebrity; first, the press frequently drew parallels between her and her 'polite lady' roles in high comedy; and second, concomitant with this, a language of value and cupidity haunt descriptions of her. Both, in turn, helped to blur the lines between Farren the actress and Farren the woman, which was made manifest by her relationship and subsequent marriage to the Earl of Derby.

In Chapter 5 I turn to my least successful subject: Wells. Neither comic nor tragic Queen, Wells struggled to forge a leading-lady career. Although she was very successful in low comedy parts, such as rustic maids, her attempts at tragedy received only mixed-reviews. I

demonstrate that, unlike Siddons and Farren, Wells had a confused 'brand', which compromised her public image. She was however the most involved with press; I explore her activity with newspaper the *World*, before turning to her use of the press in her memoir. I conclude with a brief epilogue that touches on ideas about theatrical afterlives and assert that fruitful studies of actresses' celebrity paradoxically require that we turn our gaze away from the actress and focus instead on the press that circulates their verbal image. What follows will provide a backdrop to the theatrical and news cultures in which Siddons, Farren and Wells worked from the 1770s onwards.

PART I

CHAPTER 1: STAGING THE NEWS: PROPS, PLOTS AND CHARACTERS

In Arthur Murphy's *News from Parnassus* (1776), actor Rantwell asks bookseller Vellum 'Do you compare newspapers to a theatre?' to which Vellum replies 'Do I?–What do we print lies for but to please the public?'.[1] The joke of course is that the question did not really need an answer: in the 1770s the correspondence between press and playhouse was made manifest through the repeated traffic between the two mediums, as well as their shared roles as sites of both cultural commentary and entertainment. Vellum confesses the newspapers' propensity for invention: 'We rob this man on the high-way; we kill another at a city-feast; and we stop payment for a great house, just as we like'.[2] Like the playhouse, then, the periodical press used invention to entertain its audience. In turn, the newspapers became a feature of the period's drama; it is these scenes that I investigate in this chapter.

As I will discuss in Chapter 2, the newspapers played an increasingly vital – new – role in capturing live performance: one reason for dramatists to have a vested interest in policing news culture by presenting it on stage. These dramatists, however, were also news writers; throughout the century several key theatrical figures – including Richard Steele, Oliver Goldsmith, Frances Brooke, George Colman the Elder, Arthur Murphy, David Garrick, Richard Sheridan, and Eliza Haywood – were also involved in writing for, editing and selling press production. We should be wary, therefore, about taking the (comic) criticisms of the newspapers found in drama at face value or presenting them as uncomplicated rivals; instead

[1] Arthur Murphy, *News from Parnassus,* in *The Works of Arthur Murphy, Esq.*, 7 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1786), IV., I.1, p. 401.
[2] Ibid., I.1, p. 396.

it is more productive to view them as distinct but complimentary forms.

While the newspapers increasingly devoted space to theatricals, so too newspapers (and related forms such as the magazine and journal) found their way into the plays themselves. At the start of the century, there were few references to newspapers and magazines in plays. They became a prolific presence, however, in comedies from mid-century. The increase points to the expanded role of the newspaper in everyday life. After all, eighteenth-century comedies are set in the metropolitan present (unlike tragedies which traditionally have historical, and foreign, settings) and so often reflect contemporaneous trends and concerns.

On occasion whole plots weave around newspapers but more often they appear only briefly. What follows contributes to a recent trend in eighteenth-century theatre research to pay closer attention to the various – and plentiful – usages of the press in theatrical productions.[3] One reason, I suggest, that these references have previously been overlooked, stems from a misunderstanding about the extent of the 'newness' of the newspaper during the period. The ubiquity of the media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might make the scattering of newspapers on a table in an eighteenth-century comedy appear to be insignificant scene-dressing. In fact, I suggest, that even momentary appearances of the newspaper as prop, plot device or character (represented by figures such as the critic, the editor or bookseller) were part of a cultural transformation, in which drama played a part in understanding and shaping this new medium.

But what does this mean for celebrity culture? I suggest that we can read the dramatization of news culture as an index to the cultural shifts that enabled the celebrity to emerge. In this chapter, I trace changes to representations of the periodical press on stage over

[3] Uriel Heyd, 'News Craze: Public Sphere and the Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Depiction of Newspaper Culture', *The Eighteenth Century,* 56.1 (Spring 2015), 59-84; O'Quinn, *Entertaining*; Stuart Sherman, '"The General Entertainment of My Life": The *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, and the Quidnunc's Cure', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction,* 27.3 (Spring and Summer 2015), 337-71; David Francis Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition: Empire, Revolution, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the century to investigate the advent of the 'cult of personalities', to which both press and playhouse contributed. I then turn to the ways that plays treated theatre criticism before closing with some remarks on the particular impact both new presences on the eighteenth-century stage (the cult of personality and theatre criticism) had on female theatrical celebrity in particular. First, however, I survey the various uses of the newspaper in a range of eighteenth-century comedies, some frequently discussed and others lesser-known, to show the extent to which the press featured as prop, plot device and character.

PROPS, PLOTS AND CHARACTERS

Merchants Hearty and Treadwell are found 'reading the papers' at a Coffee-House in Phanuel Bacon's apparently unstaged *The Taxes: A Dramatic Entertainment* (1757). Husband and wife, Old Visorly and Lady Jemima, bicker over the newspapers in the opening scene of J. G. Holman's *The Votary of Wealth* (1799).[4] And servant Frank is found reading a newspaper at the start of Leonard MacNally's *Retalliation* (1778).[5] Later, Frank denounces them to his master: 'The public prints, sir–there's no believing the public prints!', and then goes on to list falsehoods in real papers.[6]

There are many jokes about the number of papers in circulation. In George Colman the Elder's *The Spleen; or, Islington Spa* (1776), Rubrick announces his new paper, the *Noon-Post*, 'for it is the only time of day, you know, left open for an additional news-paper. The Morning and Evening are quite overloaded'.[7] And, Elizabeth Inchbald, herself an avid newsreader, makes a similar joke in *Every One Has His Fault* (1793): Mr. Harmony enters a coffee house and asks to 'see half a dozen newspapers–Every paper of the day' to which the waiter quips

[4] J. G. Holman, *The Votary of Wealth* (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1799), I.1, pp. 1-2.
[5] Leonard Macnally, *Retaliation* (London: F. Blyth and S. Bladon, 1782)., I.1,p. 11.
[6] Ibid., I.1,p. 25.
[7] George Colman the Elder, *The Spleen, or, Islington Spa* (London: T. Becket, 1776)., II.1, p. 32-33.

'that is about three dozen, Sir'.[8]

As well as scene dressing and quips, the increased presence of newspapers onstage serves to show how much society was changing due to the expanding role of the press. Lady Risconter in Samuel Foote's *The Bankrupt* (1776) inserts a scurrilous paragraph into a paper in order to ruin another's reputation, and Lydia in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) declares she 'shall die with disappointment' upon discovering that 'Beverley' is actually Captain Absolute and their romance is of no interest to the newspapers.[9] Ennui in Frederick Reynolds's *The Dramatist* (1788) declares: 'I […] paragraph'd myself in the newspapers—got caricatur'd in the print shops—made the story believ'd—was abus'd by every body—notic'd for my gallantry by every body—and at length visited by every body'.[10] The implication is that publicity from newspapers can make a nobody into a somebody.

The potential for misreading is also exposed; Thomas Holcroft plays on this idea in the prologue to *The School for Arrogance* in which the speaker, Mr. Bernard, appeared on stage dressed as a 'news-hawker'. He enters the stage crying 'Great News! Great news! Extraordinary news!' and mistakenly gives a 'cross-reading' of the paper – that is, reading horizontally instead of downwards in columns.[11] The ensuing nonsense makes manifest the potential for misreading. Repeatedly the theatre is presented as a site for educating readers as well as entertaining spectators – at least for those informed enough to recognise the joke.

Newspaper reading could also be a shorthand to a character's personality. In George Colman the Elder's *Polly Honeycombe* (1760), Mr. and Mrs. Honeycombe bicker over the

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[8] Elizabeth Inchbald, *Every One Has His Fault* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793)., II.1, p.30. Inchbald's diaries make frequent mention of newspapers see Elizabeth Inchbald, *The Diaries of Elizabeth Inchbald,* ed. by Ben P. Robertson, 3 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007).

[9] Samuel Foote, *The Bankrupt* (London: G. Kearsly and T. Evans, 1776), I.1, p. 7-8; Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals,* in *The Rivals and Polly Honeycombe*, ed. by David A. Brewer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2012), V.1, p. 229.

[10] Frederick Reynolds, *The Dramatist: Or Stop Him Who Can!* (T. N. Longman, 1793), III.2, p. 41.

[11] Thomas Holcroft, *The School for Arrogance* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1791), pp. v-vii. This prologue was commented upon in the newspapers: *Evening Mail,* 4-7 February 1791; *Morning Post,* 5 February 1791; *Public Advertiser,* 5 February 1791; *London Chronicle,* 3-5 February 1791.

newspapers.[12] Their daughter Polly's obsession with novels is counterpointed neatly by her father's (Mr. Honeycombe) interest in the newspapers; his dismissal of Polly's addiction to novels as 'Those abominable books!' is undermined by his trust in what the papers say.[13] David Brewer persuasively argues that *Polly Honeycombe* is a 'world of universal quixotism' and the characters can be differentiated between those who are aware of the 'generic conventions' that demark their characters and those who are not.[14] Brewer points out that whilst Polly reads novels, her parent's 'interactions with media seem to be restricted to forms as unreflexive as they are'.[15] I suggest that the newspaper plays a significant role in underscoring Honeycomb's relationship to the world; he does not recognise that newspapers, if not strictly fictional, are at least highly constructed, whereas Polly, as Brewer demonstrates, does understand the fictions behind her reading. Yet it is precisely the 'unreflexive' form of newspapers that belie the speculation, inconsistency, and fabrication, which is hidden behind the 'truth' of its conventional features such as adverts, marriage and death notices, and court news. In short, the newspaper works very hard to hide its fictions.

Another example of periodical reading as an index to character is found in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). Mrs. Hardcastle is 'in love with the town' but, as she is based in the country, can only 'enjoy London second-hand'.[16] She 'take[s] care to know every tête-à-tête from the *Scandalous Magazine*, and have all the fashions, as they come out, in a letter from the two Miss Rickets of Crooked Lane'.[17] The verb 'to know' is significant here; Hardcastle eagerly reads the '*Scandalous Magazine*', an allusion to the *Town and Country Magazine* popular for its *Tête-à-Tête* series, which ran between 1769 and 1792.

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[12] George Colman the Elder, *Polly Honecombe,* in *The Rivals and Polly Honeycombe*, ed. by David A. Brewer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2012), I.2, pp. 78-79.
[13] Ibid., I. 2, p. 88.
[14] David A. Brewer, 'Print, Performance, Personhood, Polly Honeycombe', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture,* 41 (2012), 185-94 (p. 189).
[15] Ibid.
[16] Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer*, ed. by James Ogden (London & New York: A&C Black and W. W. Norton, 2001), II.1. l.504, 509, p. 44.
[17] Ibid., II.1. l. 509-511, p. 44.

The *Tête-à-Têtes* are an extraordinary example of periodical gossip culture; each month the magazine published a scandalous love affair between notable public figures, with miniature portraits, whose names were obscured (sometimes only loosely) by a pseudonym, submitted by readers of the magazine.[18] Unsurprisingly, given their public profile, numerous actresses were the subject of *tête-à-têtes*.[19] According to Cindy McCreery, the editors were 'keen to maintain their self-professed reputation for accuracy' though most were 'often only partly accurate, and occasionally completely inaccurate'.[20] Goldsmith was not alone in alluding to the series; it served as a touchstone for other contemporary writers to signal the scandalous, gossip culture circulated by the periodical press.[21]

Mrs. Hardcastle equates the magazine with first-hand accounts in familiar letters – and those are undermined too by the correspondents' address on 'Crooked Lane'. Her interest in town life is not uncommon for many country wives in comedies, but whereas in other plays the country wife must go to London to be cured of their ignorance, she vicariously experiences the Town in part through the press. But Goldsmith presents it as a poor substitute; she cannot *know* London properly from afar, her informants (both the press and her correspondents) do not deliver the truth, though she does not recognise this. Of course, Mrs. Hardcastle's claim to have knowledge only confirms her silliness and ignorance since such reporting only offers another kind of fiction; like Mr. Honeycombe she mistakes the contents of the press for truth – a motif that repeatedly appears throughout the period.

Women are often characterised as both the primary consumers and proliferators of gossip.[22] But contemporary evidence suggests a market for male gossips too; as Clare Brock

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[18] Cindy McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton*: The *Tête-À-Tête* Series in the *Town and Country Magazine*', in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilites,* ed. by Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 207-29 (p. 211).
[19] Horace Bleackley provides a partial 'Key to the Tête-À-Têtes' in 'Tete-a-Tete Portraits in 'the Town and Country Magazine', *Notes and Queries,* s10-IV (1905), 241-42; 342-44; 462-64; 522-529.
[20] McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton*', pp. 212, 213.
[21] Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal* and Frances Brooke's *The Excursion* (discussed below) are other examples.
[22] Patricia Meyer Spacks outlines the longstanding association between women and gossip in *Gossip* (Chicago

discusses, the 'expected and ideal reader' of the notoriously salacious *The Rambler's Magazine*, which was published between 1783 and 1790 and features much gossip and speculation about public figures, were male.[23] I am mindful that such signposting does not preclude female readers or vice versa (periodicals for women were read by men too).[24] Nevertheless, it draws attention to a presumed market for a gossip magazine at least nominally intended for men. As this small sample suggests, the press features in a number of eighteenth-comedies as plot, prop device and, occasionally, even character.

At another level, staging the news enabled the theatre both to register anxieties about the political dimensions of news writing and to attend to the press's other (increasingly more significant) role as a purveyor of personalities. Although the period saw the rise of political reporting, it also ushered in the daily entertainment of people's lives. Staging the news enabled the theatre to engage with this new medium, police it, but also reinforce its cultural import – particularly significant to a theatre world that thrived on the publicity spread through the press. Though the drama often poked fun at the newspapers it also draws attention to their correspondence and their shared interest in the new Cult of Personalities that laid the foundations for the Age of Celebrity. But before satirising a nascent media society, driven by press representation, the stage mocked a figure whose relationship with the press threatened theatrical authority: the news addict.

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and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 26, 38-42, 46. See also ch. 6, 'The Talent of Ready Utterance', pp.147-170.

[23] Brock, p. 83. The full title of the magazine is *The Rambler's Magazine; or the Annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure, and the Bon Ton; Calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World; and to Furnish the Man of Pleasure with a Most Delicious Banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite Entertainment.*

[24] Rosalind Ballaster and others, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity, and the Woman's Magazine* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 46; Batchelor and Powell, pp. 12-18.

'WHAT NEWS': STAGING NEWS ADDICTION

'What news, – What news' cries Postscript as he enters a Chocolate Room in Charles Johnson's *The Generous Husband; or, the Coffee-House Politician* (1711), Henry Fielding's *Rape Upon Rape; or, the Justice Caught in his own Trap* (1730) opens in Politick's parlour with a 'table spread with news-papers', and in Arthur Murphy's *The Upholsterer; or, What News* (1757) Quidnunc, the titular character, is first seen huddled over a table filled with newspapers and pamphlets 'all around him'.[25] This triumvirate represents a central concern in the (few) dramas about news culture in the first half of the century: the news addict.

From the outset the figure of the 'news-addict' has been the subject of much critical discussion, both in the eighteenth-century and today.[26] Dramatist and news-writer Richard Steele, invented the term 'quid nunc' (literally meaning 'what now') in the *Tatler* (3 May 1709, No. 10) to describe the tedious, obsessive and laughable news-addicts.[27] In that same paper Joseph Addison created the character of the upholsterer, 'the greatest Newsmonger in our Quarter', who 'was much more inquisitive to know what passed in Poland than in his own Family' (6 April 1710, No. 155).[28]

Addison's upholsterer, who is oblivious to the responsibilities to his family and livelihood, is the blueprint for Postscript, Politick and Quidnunc. They too are so preoccupied with the newspapers that they neglect their domestic duties. They read every newspaper; they are not simply readers but they appear to embody news culture, as is the case when Florinda says of Postscript, 'This Thing is a walking News-paper: His Head is the very Emblem of the

[25] Charles Johnson, *The Generous Husband: Or, the Coffee House Politician* (London: Bernard Lintott and Egbert Sanger, 1713), II.1, p. 16; Henry Fielding, *Rape Upon Rape; or, the Justice Caught in His Own Trap* (London: J. Wats, 1730), I.1, p.1; Arthur Murphy, *The Upholsterer, or What News?* (London, 1758).
[26] Recent discussions by Sherman, 'General Entertainment', pp. 344-47 and 368-71; O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, pp. 6-11.
[27] Richard Steele, *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald Frederic Bond, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), I, *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198124849.book.1>, p. 89.
[28] Ibid., II, p. 369.

dirty Houses he frequents, full of foul Pipes, News, and Coffee–'.[29] Despite their reading they are credulous, with little critical faculty shown to evince real understanding, though they believe they have political insight.

Despite the news-addicts' preoccupation with world affairs he is outside of *the World*. Events pass him by as he obsesses over the news: despite the title indicating otherwise the news-addict is often on the periphery of the main plot. For example, Politick's daughter, Hillarit, fed up with her father's near-religious 'Enthusiasm' for the news, runs away to marry her lover.[30] She becomes involved in a legal drama that exposes the corruption of the judiciary (and of absolute power more generally), whilst her father barely looks up from his papers. The news-addict and his newspapers are not just a joke, but a social threat.

At the start of the eighteenth century the newspaper was beginning to rival the cultural authority of the stage. If, as Stuart Sherman suggests, in the first half of the century the theatre was conceived by Addison and Steele as the antidote to press addiction, I suggest that in the second half it helped to spread the contagion.[31] Though the stage continued to critique the press, it nevertheless increasingly relied on periodical publicity; as I discuss in Chapter 2, the newspapers became crucial sites of theatrical mediation; not only did they print notices of upcoming performances, but they also introduced regular theatrical reviews and puffed the players. For theatre and theatrical celebrity to thrive, periodicals had to be harnessed and the readers encouraged.

References to newspapers continued to be scant on stage for the first half of the century, but as news culture expanded (not simply the number of periodicals in circulation but also the content broadening to include cultural affairs and eventually societal gossip), so too did the allusions to the press. News addicts were no longer lone satirical figures, though they still

[29] Johnson, III.1. p. 28.
[30] Fielding. I.2. pp. 2-4.
[31] Sherman, 'General Entertainment', p. 346.

appeared occasionally, but a whole range of newsreaders – and newsmakers – featured. This newly expanded news sphere included women as well as men, fashionables as well as Cits, and scandal as well as global affairs. The press mediated the theatre to its readers, the theatre reciprocated by mediating news culture back. The finest example of the changed representation of news-addicts comes in Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779).

David Francis Taylor and Daniel O'Quinn have explored *The Critic'*s presentation of news culture, political context and use of current affairs.[32] I examine it here too precisely because it is exemplary in its attention to the anxieties about news culture. The play opens with Mr. and Mrs. Dangle 'at breakfast, and reading newspapers'. [33] The newspapers disrupt the domestic setting as each of the pair bickers about the other's reading. Whilst Mr. Dangle reads the newspapers for theatrical intelligence; his wife reads it for political news. As Taylor observes, both are 'dysfunctional readers' because they fail to understand what is really being said.[34]

Mr. Dangle, who declares 'I hate all politics but theatrical politics' (I.1.l.6-7), could not have existed earlier in the century; only from the late 1750s did more consistent theatrical news feature in the daily press – and by the late 1770s theatrical news was rife. Somewhat unexpectedly, given earlier wives' opposition to the news, Mrs. Dangle is a fervent reader of newspapers. Not unlike her *quidnunc* predecessors, she appears to be preoccupied with political news and the threat of invasion. She complains that he 'never will read anything that's worth listening to' (I.1.l.28-29, p. 8). By contrast she attends to newspapers letters 'demonstrating the certainty of an invasion, and proving that the nation is utterly undone' (I.1.l.30-32, p. 8-9). It would be a mistake to read this simply as political angst. In the following line she lambasts Mr. Dangle's theatrical focus: 'But you never will read anything to entertain one' (I.1.l.32-33, p. 9).

[32] Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, pp. 45-57; O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, pp. 221-39.
[33] Sheridan, *The Critic*, p. I.1. p. 7. Further references made in text.
[34] Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, p. 47.

Her final criticism, it seems, is that Dangle's reading is less entertaining. So, whilst Mrs. Dangle appears to have more a serious reason for reading, she really wants to be entertained: she is driven by gossip.

Whilst the Dangles are figures of fun, Sheridan reserves his more stinging satire for the creators of news and spectacle who incite fear and contribute to the entertainment of panic, both in print and on stage. The play in rehearsal, by Mr. Puff, is *The Spanish Armada*, a response to Sadler's Wells Theatre's recent piece *The Prophecy; Queen Elizabeth and Tilbury* (1779), quickly produced in response to the threat of Spanish invasion. The rehearsal (II.2-III.1, pp. 45-84) itself is riddled with problems, not least the frequent interruptions from Puff and the 'very liberal' (II.2.l.56, p.44) cuts of the text made by the players (as well as incorrect cues and forgetting an aside that exacerbate the muddle). The rehearsal evokes a patchwork effect found in newspapers which were generally written by many hands. The play's closing lines, also spoken by Puff, offer a corrective: 'Well, pretty well – but not quite perfect – so ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we'll rehearse this piece again tomorrow' (III.1.l.289-291, p84). The prospect of another rehearsal the next day elicits a similar effect to that of news writing; tomorrow: another day, another paper, and another version of politics.

The Critic presents news-addicts for the new media age that surfaced from the 1770s onwards; no longer the preserve of men in city coffee houses, the newspapers were read by both men and women throughout society for business, politics and pleasure. The biggest change in news content since the early years was in its contribution to a developing 'cult of personalities'. News stories were now driven by gossip about individuals, a necessary component for the emergence of the Age of Celebrity. The theatre, in particular though not exclusively, utilised 'puff' paragraphs to advertise their players. In a forensic analysis of puffs, Mr. Puff the self-proclaimed 'Practitioner in the Panegyric' and 'Professor of the Art of Puffing', outlines the categories of puff:

> PUFFING is of various sorts – the principal are, The PUFF DIRECT – the PUFF PRELIMINARY – the PUFF COLLATERAL – the PUFF COLLUSIVE, and the PUFF OBLIQUE, or PUFF by IMPLICATION. – These all assume, as circumstances require, the various forms of LETTER TO THE EDITOR – OCCASIONAL ANECDOTE – IMPARTIAL CRITIQUE – OBSERVATION from CORRESPONDENT, – or ADVERTISEMENT FROM THE PARTY.
>
> (II. 1. l. 171-78, p. 35)

The so-called 'art' outlined by Puff offers a kind of index to press promotion. They are not exclusively found in print but can also be enacted on the world's stage: puffs are a kind of endemic symptom of celebrity culture. The joke works because (at least some of) the audience would recognise Mr. Puff's characterisation of publicity; if you do not recognise these kinds of puffs then the joke is on you.

These categories or, as Taylor describes them, 'misrepresentative strategies', evince the various kinds of subterfuge found in eighteenth-century newswriting.[35] Sheridan was not alone in pointing out the 'misrepresentative strategies'; not only did other playwrights mock the unscrupulous conventions for publicity (and news-reporting more generally), but also newspapers themselves published attacks on the dubious content of other newspapers.

The news-addict, however, even after almost a century of reading the papers still cannot, like Postscript, Politick and Quidnunc, actually understand the news. We cannot, however, assume such credulity was widespread; Sheridan's dissection of news practices surely suggests that most readers were nuanced, or could be if they came to the theatre, in their news reading. This of course begs the question why, then, did newspapers remain popular when their content was filled with known fallacies? The answer is that the newspaper must be understood in terms of its entertainment value, as well as its presentation of news. The stage and its players were ever more reliant on the press as publicity machine. All the playhouse could do was stage

[35] Ibid., p. 46.

news culture in order to critique it, mediate it to the public, and create theatrical quidnuncs.

THE CULT OF PERSONALITY: 'PEN' PORTRAITS IN ACTION

What changed between Postscript in 1711 and Mr. and Mrs. Dangle in 1779? The rise of the 'cult of personalities', driven by print gossip, changed both the content of the news and of drama. Gossip, of course, was nothing new – on or offstage. But the idea that the newspaper could be a site of staging identity was a transformation from its earlier primarily political focus. Given their shared capacity for making and breaking public identities, the press and the playhouse were in many ways natural bedfellows. This shift represents a cultural transformation in the content and purpose of the news, a shift made manifest in the work of Samuel Foote.

'The newspaper', writes Jane Moody, 'in tandem with Foote's theatre, was emerging as a crucial site for the construction and destruction of reputations; theatres and newspapers also began to exploit their mutual interests in the production of publicity'.[36] What the papers could do in 'pen portraits', Foote could find expression for in live performance. The interest in personality and physicality reflects the fashion for physiognomy and the belief that you can 'know' a person through their looks.[37] In a way Foote exploits that relationship: his imitations present a kind of distorted similitude. The joke lies in the gap between the real person and the performance.

Foote's popular imitation shows were made possible by the well-knownness of his subjects: he mimicked a range of people including fellow players including Henry Woodward, James Quin and David Garrick. Later he targeted specific individuals in other comedies, such

[36] Moody, p. 72.
[37] Marcia R. Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1993), p. 94.

as Methodist preacher George Whitfield (1714-1770) in *The Minor* (1760) and publisher George Faulkner in *The Orators* (1762).[38] As Michael Kinservik discusses, Foote was not the first to stage public figures, but he certainly benefited from new kinds of publicity in the newspapers.[39]

Mimicking individuals is one thing but staging a newspaper scandal is another. Foote's staging of publicity reached its apogee in *A Trip to Calais* (1775) and *The Capuchin* (1776), which satirise the bigamy scandal of Elizabeth Chudleigh, the Duchess of Kingston (1721-1788). Matthew Kinservik and Gillian Russell both provide detailed accounts of the scandal, which demonstrates its significance to the development of media celebrity.[40] I briefly rehearse it here because it evinces a new dramatic landscape that would feast on the newspapers (and vice versa). I concentrate less, however, on the details of the scandal and more on Foote's presentation of news and news culture in the two plays.

Elizabeth Chudleigh rose from an inauspicious rank to become a dominant social force, predominantly through her relationships with high profile men and her attention-seeking attire.[41] In 1744 she secretly married Augustus Hervey, later 3rd Earl of Bristol, though they subsequently separated, and she became mistress, and later wife (in 1769), to Evelyn Pierrepont, 2nd Duke of Kingston. Following Pierrepoint's death in 1773 his nephew, Evelyn Medows, renewed old rumours about Chudleigh's earlier marriage, which ultimately led to the bigamy trial at Westminster-Hall in April 1776, an elaborate event Russell describes as 'Kingston's theatre'.[42] Chudleigh was eventually found guilty (though escaped the punishment of branding on the hand due to her title) and she promptly left the country.

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[38] For an overview of Foote's imitations see Matthew J. Kinservik, *Disciplining Satire: The Censorship of Satiric Comedy on the Eighteenth-Century London Stage* (Lewisburg, PA and London: Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 134-71.
[39] Ibid., pp. 136-38.
[40] Matthew J. Kinservik, *Sex, Scandal, and Celebrity in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre ,* pp. 154-77.
[41] T. A. B. Corley, 'Chudleigh, Elizabeth (C. 1720–1788)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[42] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 174.

The story of the trial, and its aftermath, is punctuated by Foote's theatrical responses. In *A Trip to Calais*, Jenny Minnikin elopes with her lover Dick Drugget to Calais to avoid a marriage with Kit Codling. In the subplot, Colonel Crosby seeks to marry Miss Lydell, a companion of Kitty Crocodile who has left England following her husband's death. Kitty is a caricature of Chudleigh. Foote presents a woman known through the press: she is a media-constructed personality. News culture ripples throughout the play in reference to Kitty; for example, she maintains her excessive mourning for the benefit of Mrs. Clack (a gossip), who is 'an absolute Gazette, and at her return will publish me in every part of the town'.[43] Kitty only actually appears towards the end of Act II, though she is talked about beforehand, but this is itself a kind of metaphor for notoriety, to be present and known without embodiment.

A Trip to Calais never reached performance: it was refused by the Lord Chamberlain.[44] The story was not over, however: in May 1776, Foote's servant John Sangster, reportedly funded by Chudleigh, claimed that Foote attempted a sexual attack on his person. Chudleigh's supporter and editor of the *Public Ledger*, Reverend William Jackson (1737-1795) intensified attacks on Foote in his paper and also published the *Sodom and Onan, A Satire* – a poem that in part 'dramatises Sangster's charges'.[45]

In response Foote reworked *A Trip to Calais* into *The Capuchin* (1776), which was staged at the Haymarket on 19 August 1776, and made Jackson his target. Kitty Crocodile does not appear in *The Capuchin*; Chudleigh is represented instead by the unseen Lady Deborah Dripping. Foote's satire was instead directed at Jackson, who Foote caricatures as 'Dr. Viper', priest and editor of the *Scandalous Chronicle*. The allusion to Jackson was not lost on the audience; a correspondent for the *St. James's Chronicle* (17-20 August 1776) recalled that

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[43] Samuel Foote, *A Trip to Calais; and the Capuchin* (London: T. Cadell, 1778), III.1, p. 67-68.
[44] For details see Kinservik, *Sex, Scandal, and Celebrity*, pp. 122-25; Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 174.
[45] William Jackson, *Sodom and Onan, a Satire. Inscrib'd to Esqr. Alias, the Devil Upon Two Sticks* ([London]: s.n.), in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*; Declan Kavanagh, *Effeminate Years: Literature, Politics, and Aesthetics in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. 195.

'some of Mr. Viper's Friends were, in the Language of the Capuchin, visible from their Hisses in different Parts of the House'.[46] O'Donnovan, a Capuchin priest played by Foote, claims that Viper 'mow'd down reputations like muck; push'd yourself into the pay of lady Deborah Dripping, produced anonymous paragraphs against her of your own composition, and got paid by her for not putting them into your paper'.[47] The rest of the play follows Viper and O'Donnovan's plot to recapture Jenny and involves an attempted rape scene that alludes to the sodomy accusation.[48] *The Capuchin* does not simply satirise Jackson and the scurrilous trend for newspaper scandal, but stages the scandal itself; in doing so Foote undermines the accusation and the press coverage by rendering it somewhat gruesome and absurd.

The sodomy charges were brought to trial in December 1776, though, according to Kinservik, in 'deference to Foote' most of the papers, excepting the *Public Ledger*, ensured 'total suppression of Sangster's testimony'.[49] Though acquitted, Foote's reputation never really recovered. In all, the drama lasted around two years – Foote died on 21 October 1777. O'Donnovan's words to Viper achieved a new level of poignancy: 'my dead men are all alive, and your live men had much better be dead'.[50]

Press and playhouse were no longer simply mediating stories to the public but became the source of the story. Though Foote's plays do satirise the scandal, they more significantly comment upon the publicity of scandal. Foote also draws attention to the fact that once in the public domain personal identity becomes a kind of fictional character, both on stage and in the press. The *real* Chudleigh does not appear in print or on stage; instead various versions of her are presented and consumed by a public eager to engage with public figures. The newspapers therefore were a kind of personality marketplace; harnessing a newspaper (for a cost) to present

[46] *St. James Chronicle*, 17 August 1776.
[47] Foote, *A Trip to Calais; and the Capuchin*, II.1, p. 114.
[48] Kinservik, *Sex, Scandal, and Celebrity*, pp. 181-82.
[49] Ibid., p. 182.
[50] Foote, *A Trip to Calais; and the Capuchin*., II.1, p. 113.

a favourable version of the self for the public to read (for a fee) – a transaction that could spawn innumerable other representations – was central to the development of celebrity. It is to the troubling sense of personality for sale in the press that I now turn.

FOR SALE: A PERSON(ALITY)

Foote's comedies revealed the potential for news stories to be remediated on the stage, and, though he built his career on them, they show ambivalence about the cult of personality. His staging of real-life scandal highlights the risks of public exposure in print (distinct from oral gossip which likely has less reach). Over the same period other dramas also exposed the risks to reputation that the cult of personality and the press ushered in. Through the newspapers the self became a print commodity that could be made, exchanged and sold. Comedies registered anxieties related to the commodification of personality and the idea of selling oneself in the press.

Adverts had first appeared in the newspapers at the start of the century and their revenue was essential to newspaper production (most newspapers were subtitled '*Advertiser*'). As dramatists began to broaden their usage of newspapers on stage, adverts began to appear in plots. For example, in *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766), servant Canton reads the newspaper to the ageing, narcissistic Lord Ogleby. He frets when he cannot find any appropriate Town gossip so pacifies Ogleby by reading out an advertisement for 'Cosmetique Royale' – a panacea for all skin ills – that typifies the kind of cure-all product advertised in newspapers.[51] This simple joke on Ogleby's vanity demonstrates that the newspaper adverts on stage could be used as a shorthand to denote character.

[51] David Garrick and George Colman the Elder, *The Clandestine Marriage*, ed. by Noel Chevalier (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1995)., II.2. l.115-121, p.71.

More often, however, advertisements were used as a plot device to evince unease about the potential of the newspapers to sell oneself. In Colman's *The Jealous Wife* (1761) Squire Russet desires his daughter, Harriot, to marry horse-mad Sir Harry Beagle. When she runs away Sir Harry suggests recovering her through an advertisement:

> SIR HARRY**:** Suppose you put an advertisement into the newspapers, describing her marks, her age, her height, and where she strayed from. I recovered a bay mare once by that method.
> RUSSETT: Advertise her! What! Describe my daughter, and expose her in the public papers, with a reward for bringing her home, like horses, stolen or strayed!–Recovered a bay mare! –The devil's in the fellow! He thinks of nothing but racers, and bay mares, and stallions. 'Sdeath! I wish your–
> SIR HARRY: I wish *Harriot* was fairly pounded. It wou'd save Us both a great deal of Trouble.[52]

Sir Harry remains confused by the difference between a woman and horse throughout – both are, after all, kinds of possessions – and at last swaps his stake in Harriot for a horse.[53] His failure to distinguish between the two means that he does not recognise the potentially damaging consequences for Harriot's reputation by being thus represented in the papers. This exchange expresses anxieties of womanhood, possession, property; throughout the play Russett reminds others that as Harriot's father he has the right to dispose of her as he wishes; yet he balks at the idea that she is actually something to be advertised. Of course, the idea of the advertisement is absurd for comic effect, but Colman taps into the wider concerns about press representation as a kind of exposure and the risk of being turned into a commodity.

In John O'Keeffe's *A Beggar on Horseback* (1785) maid Nancy Buttercup believes she has been abandoned by her strolling player lover, Mr. Tinsel. She is also fed up with her 'domineering' brother Corny and the 'addresses' of her master, Codger, so she puts an

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[52] George Colman the Elder, *The Jealous Wife*, ed. by E. R. Wood, in *Plays by David Garrick and George Colman the Elder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), II.2, p. 68.
[53] Ibid., V. 3, p.103.

advertisement in the newspaper (the Times) in order to gain a position in another household. [54] The advert reads, 'please enquire for A.B. At the Hog-in-Pound, Oxford-street' – 'A.B.' for Ann Buttercup. Codger sees A.B.'s advert and goes to enquire. In the next scene, Mr. Tinsel (who is actually Codger's nephew Horace) reads an advert to join a strolling company by another 'A.B.'. When Mr. Tinsel arrives at the inn, he is sent to Nancy by mistake, and Codger is directed to the other 'A.B.', Mrs. Mummery. Thinking Codger has responded to her advert for strolling players, Mummery auditions him. Though farcical, the confusion and cross-purposes here signal the potential risks of both advertisements and newspaper anonymity. For theatre stars, who were daily advertised and paragraphed, the potential for the public to misread is significant.

The concern about public exposure, and in particular the newspaper's role in it, acquired new urgency from the 1770s, when the press attended to gossip like never before, widely acknowledged to be due to the editor of the *Morning Post,* Henry Bate.[55] The humorous presentation of advertisements on stage perhaps belies the troubling aspects of publicity, the darker sides of which are made manifest in novels such as Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782) in which pawnbroker's wife Mrs. Myers has been looking after the now-mad heroine Cecilia in the hopes of financial reward; after seeing no advertisement for anyone seeking Cecilia and 'growing uneasy from the uncertainty of pay for her trouble', Mrs. Myers is encouraged to send an advert for Cecilia to the *Daily Advertiser*, and in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1797) Maria's husband advertises for his absconded wife in a newspaper that leads to her eviction.[56] The use of advertisements in the novels is darker in tone than the

[54] John O'Keeffe, *A Beggar on Horseback,* in *The Dramatic Works of John O'Keeffe*, 4 vols (Printed for the author, by T. Woodfall, 1798), III, II.1, pp. 448-49. Further references in text.
[55] Werkmeister, p. 5; Robert Darnton, 'The True History of Fake News', *The New York Review,* (13 February 2017) <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news> [accessed 2 October 2017] (para. 6 of 13).
[56] Frances Burney, *Cecilia, or, Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. by Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 900-01; Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, ed. by Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 151.

use in comic plays, nevertheless, the comedies draw attention to the potential disaster (albeit through farce) of being advertised in the press.

The idea of a person(ality) being bought and sold, made and remade through newspaper adverts signals a concern with the potential risks of newspaper exposure. Adverts were of course central to the success of playhouses and players; Squire Russett's horror at the idea of his daughter being advertised must be understood in the context that the actress playing her was indeed advertised every day in the playbills. Adverts for the theatre were, however, standardised textual forms, understood by readers through their generic convention. Gossip paragraphs, however, were filled with misleading or misrepresentative 'news' that required new kinds of reading. The longstanding jokes about the unreliability of the press took on greater significance when it was reputations at risk – not the muddled foreign affairs that preoccupied quidnuncs earlier in the century. The scandal of public life and its mediation in the press came under increasing scrutiny on stage. The advertisements are an obvious mercantile device; in truth, however, all kinds of newspaper appearances could be compromising, and it is this theme that several dramatists addressed from the 1770s onwards.

'IF THE WORLD WILL, WHY LET IT BE DECEIVED': FAKE NEWS AS ENTERTAINMENT

The cult of personality thrived on insidious gossip and speculation inserted into newspapers. Spearheaded by Henry Bate, the editor of the *Morning Post* between 1772 and 1780, scandalous rumour and defamatory paragraphs appeared in almost all newspapers by the end of the decade – and quickly became a comic plot device. For example, in Hannah Cowley's *More Ways Than One* (1783) Sir Marvel Mushroom anonymously inserts a poem against the quick-witted and acerbic Miss Archer in a newspaper.[57] We see both him and Miss Juvenile

[57] Hannah Cowley, *More Ways Than One* (London: T. Evans, 1784), II.3, p.31.

delight in telling Miss Archer about the poem and they even read some to her, and she admits that all of her 'friends' have been to show it to her. Mushroom does not particularly dislike Miss Archer but sees himself as being a town wit (at which he spectacularly fails). Carlton, in love with Miss Archer from afar, asks Mushroom if he can pretend authorship. He does so because Miss Archer has rejected the advances of others who professed their undying love for her, and believes that she might fall for someone who is not so enamoured. At play's close, with Miss Archer firmly in love with Carlton, all is revealed.

More Ways Than One draws attention to the fact that members of the public, not just professional writers, inserted paragraphs and poems. There were limitations; not only did you have to have the money to pay for the paragraph but also, as Miss Juvenile realises, you could be rejected. At the start of Act III, she wonders how the scurrilous paragraph on Miss Archer managed to be printed:

> I have wrote [sic] twenty pretty things of this sort myself; but some wise, grave editor or other, always cropt [sic] my laurels. The next morning the answers to correspondents never failed to inform them that, "*The Lines of L. S. were inadmissible*;" or, "The Epigram signed Laura *wont* [sic] *do for our Paper*;" or "we must desire our fair correspondent Clarissa to *learn to spell*, before she pretends to write heroic verse.[58]

Miss Juvenile's speech parrots the kinds of public rejections printed in 'To Our Correspondents' sections in the papers. Despite Miss Juvenile's ill-success, the public were not only readers of newspapers who delight in its scandal as a form of entertainment, but also its producers. Crucially, however, Cowley presents only shallow characters like Miss Juvenile and Mushroom who produce scandalous paragraphs and poems. Despite the criticisms of gossip-culture enacted in *More Ways Than One*, public exposure was increasingly central to the success of theatrical culture, particularly through the periodical press.

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[58] Ibid., III.1, p.34.

By dramatising paragraph culture Cowley makes entertainment of entertainment, though in accordance with ideals of the theatre as a didactic space, she also exposes the folly of such behaviour. Her replication of newspaper form and style too is only slightly exaggerated and also suggests her audience's familiarity with news content. It is also worth bearing in mind that paragraphing was an essential component of players' celebrity. Within the fictional world of the play the moral is straightforward, but for players, and actresses in particular, scandalous gossip could be just as beneficial.

The kind of character desirous of being in a newspaper does not go unchallenged either. In Frederick Reynolds's *Notoriety* (1792), for example, Nominal, ever hopeful of being paragraphed, is thrilled when, alone with Lady Acid, her husband knocks on the door:

> NOMINAL: Your husband!–tell me my darling–tell me–is he jealous?
> LADY ACID:–Jealous! to an extreme.
> NOMINAL:–What! he'll bring an action, and sue for divorce?
> LADY ACID:–Yes.
> NOMINAL:–Paragraph and Caricature me!
> LADY ACID:–Certainly
> NOMINAL:–Challenge and fight me!
> LADY ACID:–Undoubtedly.
> NOMINAL:–-Huzza!–Bravo!–I'm made; I'm immortalized, let me out, and let him in directly.[59]

In reality, of course, such a level of exposure was disastrous: it could lead to financial ruin and social exile. But Reynolds is picking up on the extremes of the cult of personality, for whom scandal was their only way of being anybody, unlike aristocrats who could lose much by such revelations, such as Elizabeth Stanley, née Hamilton, Countess of Derby who was ostracised following the news of her affair with the Duke of Bolton.[60] For actresses, however, notoriety was a chance to be somebody – as Reynolds well knew; his lover was Mary Wells, the subject

[59] Frederick Reynolds, *Notoriety* (Dublin: P. Byend, 1792), IV.2, p. 44-45.
[60] Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 91 and 203-12.

of Chapter 5, whose 'notorious celebrity' helped her stake a claim, albeit briefly, as a rival to Siddons.[61]

Perhaps owing to its continued popularity, Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777) is the best-known example of gossip culture on the eighteenth-century stage. Described by David Francis Taylor as 'an extended critique of the printed word' the play explores how 'town news' governed both social relations and personal reputation.[62] In particular, Ruth Scobie argues, the play 'dramatises the extraordinary, instant amplification of traditional oral gossip' through the press.[63] Here I turn to the play's presentation of media publicity and personal reputation.

The prologue, written by David Garrick and spoken by Tom King, signals the play's attention to the gossip, women and newspapers. The speaker imagines the papers as somewhat medicinal, a cure for the 'Vapours', and then, in the next moment, the speaker becomes 'Lady Wormwood'; meaning quite the opposite of restorative.[64] For Lady Wormwood newspapers are part of the daily cycle of life; she takes 'tea and scandal' upon rising at midday, following a night of gaming and hungrily laps up the gossip in the newspaper until recognising herself:

> Oh! That's me, the villain!
> Throw it behind the fire and never more
> Let that vile paper come within my door.[65]
>
> (l.24-26)

As well as her hypocrisy, we also see in Lady Wormwood that the news-addict is no longer the 'cit', but a woman of fashion. Played by a man, however, Lady Wormwood is a ridiculous figure; a symptom, according to Russell, of a larger attack on the fashionable woman in *The*

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[61] See chapter three, 'Mary Wells's Notorious Celebrity' in Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, pp. 98-134.
[62] Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, p. 34.
[63] Scobie, p. 240.
[64] 'wormwood, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230312?redirectedFrom=wormwood> [accessed 1 October 2017]
[65] Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The School for Scandal*, ed. by Ann Blake (London: Bloomsbury), p. 39. Further references made in text.

School for Scandal.[66] It is not simply that gossip is shown here to be a female pursuit, but that gossip perhaps even threatens women's femininity.

The play begins with Lady Sneerwell and Snake, a hack, in conference over some gossip. The press is a central component of the publicity-seeking, scandal making world of Lady Sneerwell as testified by her opening line: 'The paragraphs, you say, Mr. Snake, were all inserted?' (I.1.l.1, p. 41). They discuss the circulation of malicious gossip, of which the newspaper is the starting point; they simply wait for the news to reach Mrs. Clackitt and then, as Snake insinuates, 'the business is as good as done' (I.1.l.8-9, p. 41).

If Lady Sneerwell is concerned about ruining reputations in the press, then others are worried about being ruined. In Sir Peter Teazle's monologue on the state of his marriage he worries mostly about his reputation: 'I am sneered at by my acquaintance and paragraphed in the newspapers' (I.2.l.13-14, p. 59). Of course, the material threat to Teazle comes from Joseph Surface, who almost cuckolds him, but printed gossip is presented as almost more insidious; its capacity to be saved and re-circulated requires escaping mankind altogether.

The insertion of a paragraph is presented as only the start; it is the spread of gossip that does the real damage. Consider what Snake says of Mrs. Clackitt: 'I have more than once traced her causing a *tête-à-tête* in the *Town and Country Magazine*, when the parties perhaps had never seen each other's face before in the course of their lives' (I.1.l.16-19, p. 42). Whereas Oliver Goldsmith mocks the credulity of Mrs. Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer*, Sheridan takes aim at the producers of gossip. He at once casts doubt upon the veracity of *tête-à-tête* series, whilst acknowledging that such doubt is irrelevant; once a story is in circulation truth has little value. This has great significance not only for the world of the play, but the audience and the players enacting it.

In *The School for Scandal* Snake does the dirty work, including submitting the

[66] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 202.

paragraph with a 'feigned hand' to heighten the deceit (I.1. l. 2-3, p. 41). We should not sideline Snake, however; Sheridan paid particular attention to developing his character. He chose the name 'Snake' after trying other names; 'Spatter' (the name used in early draft 'The Slanderers') and 'Miss Verjuice' ('truth juice').[67] Neither of these names implies the viciousness of Snake's role. The latter, intended to be Lady Sneerwell's 'poor female relation', and not a professional hack, would have altered Sheridan's assessment of print news culture.[68] Consider also the demotion of 'Lady' Clackitt to Mrs. Clacket; a minor change, but one that registers the systemic influence of news culture, rather than simply an attack on aristocratic ladies.[69]

There is some disagreement regarding the source for Snake; Gillian Russell suggests that 'Snake's role […] would have reminded contemporary audiences of Viper' (and thus William Jackson), whereas Ruth Scobie argues that he 'probably alludes to Henry Bate'.[70] I lean towards Russell's suggestion, but both suggestions are plausible. The multiple potential sources for Snake adds to the sense of a world now filled with Snakes who, as David Frances Taylor argues, 'will continue unimpeded well beyond the fifth act'.[71] It is not, I suggest, a choice to participate in the print world, but rather the print world is the framework within which everyone now operates: Snake cannot be stopped because another Snake would take his place.

A lesser-known play, *A School for Scandal; or, Newspapers*, anonymously written and seemingly not staged, was published in 1792.[72] It deliberately riffs off Sheridan's title and to some extent his thematic concerns, but whilst Sheridan's scandal is orchestrated by fashionable society, this writer places blame on the system of the press itself. That is not to say fashionable circles are not criticised; the epigram on the frontispiece reads '*if the World will, why let it be*

[67] Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 'The Slanderers', in *The Origins of the School for Scandal*, ed. by Bruce Redford (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Library, 1986), p. 20; Sheridan, *School for Scandal*, p. 41n3.
[68] Sheridan, *School for Scandal*, p. 41n3.
[69] Sheridan, 'The Slanderers', p.20.
[70] Russell *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 203; Scobie, pp. 239-40.
[71] Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, p. 35.
[72] *A School for Scandal, or News-Papers. A Comedy: As It Has Been Long and Successfully Played Upon the Public* (London: H. D. Symonds, 1792).

deceived': the public are admonished for allowing the press to behave unscrupulously: many read and enjoy scandal until they are the subject. Given that it was never performed, the subtitle, 'A Comedy: As it has been long and successfully played upon the public', refers instead to comedy of newspapers as it played out on the world's stage. Perhaps it was never meant to be staged; but rather constructed as dramatic fiction knowingly: such an audacious critique could never be staged.

A capacious treatment of newspaper culture, *A School for Scandal* is an overly long and laboured satire, but it is important insofar as it thoroughly dissects news-making at the close of the eighteenth-century. Act I introduces us to a wide range of newspaper readers; Mr. Bramble, a prolific reader of newspapers who nevertheless calls them 'vile' and who inserts paragraphs written for him by an intermediary (Varnish) in praise of himself; Mr. and Mrs Hartley and their grown-up children Charlotte and Charles, and Captain Russel and his sister Maria (wards of Bramble); and Moses the money-lender and some bankers. Almost episodic, the conversation changes topic rapidly; not unlike the style of the newspapers its characters' court, in which unrelated news is crammed together.

Three seemingly disparate storylines are drawn together through their interactions with the newspaper and a (thin) plot involving Bramble's fraudulent use of his ward's fortunes. This plot is resolved quickly and is there merely as a frame to attack the newspapers. The plot emphasises the potential financial implications of newspaper coverage: the bankers make suspect investment choices based on unreliable news, which risks the economy (and which Moses benefits from). When Charlotte is cruelly paragraphed in fictional paper the *Firebrand,* Mrs. Hartley simply dismisses such gossip as the 'invented' work of 'discarded servants' whom nobody believes.[73] Unsubstantiated rumours about Charles too appear in the paper, so he and Russel resolve to go to the newspaper offices.

[73] Ibid, I.2, p.12.

Act II is set entirely in the *Firebrand* office. Disguised, Charles and Russel pretend to be interested in setting up their own newspaper and speak with the 'Conductor', under the premise of employing him as Editor. Little progresses the plot, but it is rather an extended treatment on newspaper content. Several people, Lord Hurrymore, Captain Derry, and Lady Louisa Lovely and Lady Belmont, enter the offices to attack the Conductor for paragraphs about them. Then we see various news writers, Mr. Modest, Mr. Scheme, Mr. Puff and Dark, who each explain their kinds of contribution. At the act's close a Sheriff's Officer enters on Charles and Russel's instruction and 'press' the Conductor aboard a ship.

Act III quickly wraps up the thin comedy of manners plot in which Bramble's fraudulent activity is exposed and Charles and Maria, and Charlotte and Russel, agree to marry. The remainder is an extended scene at a news editors 'club' committee meeting, which Charles and Russel attend, again in disguise. The scene advances the dissection of newspapers in the previous Acts by assessing the qualities of real newspapers. So, for example, the evening papers are attacked for copying the morning papers' news. The editors are all named as their papers and this allows for stereotyping, based on the characteristics of each paper. Mr. Herald is particularly attacked as 'often in the *dirt'*, the 'hireling of any party' whose 'duplicity and meanness have brought the name of a news-paper to disgrace'.[74] It was not unique to characterise editors of newspapers in this way, the *Argus* (13 November 1790) published a dialogue scene, entitled 'Literary Congress', between a Mr. World, Mr. Herald, Mr. Oracle and Mr. Diary. Returning to the play: at the end in fighting ensues before the justices arrive and they all run away. Charles and Russel, joined by Manly, laugh at the editors and they 'drink the *reformation* of the public papers', but only after some final stereotyping: 'Methought the Star was dim–the Post doubly rapid–and I believe the World thought itself at an end'.[75] These would

[74] Ibid, III.3, p.71.
[75] Ibid, III.3, p.97, 96.

all be familiar jokes to regular newsreaders: in 1792, for example, the formerly popular newspaper the *World* was near closure.

A School for Scandal frequently replicates (only slightly exaggerating) the conventions of newspaper paragraphs, evidence of their widespread usage and familiarity. Staging the news had come a long way since the start of the century; there was no longer a singular *quidnunc*, mocked because of his unusual attachment to the news, because everyone was involved in news culture. Including the theatre. Perhaps managers refused the play or perhaps it was never intended to be staged; either way the dramatic structure enables the play to be a critique not only of the newspapers but also of other theatrical responses to the news, which are often less robust. Moreover, a blatant attack on the newspapers would be perhaps unwise given the press's role in promoting the playhouse.

Much of this is very silly; the characters are thin and typical of others, better drawn, elsewhere, and not much really happens. Nevertheless, it provides us one of the most sustained treatments of the newspapers and an insight into how comedies characterized them. The newspaper editors are mocked for their familiar behaviours, but also exposed for their disregard of the human lives ruined by their fictions. It is perhaps no surprise that it was not staged: it would be unwise to attack editors quite so crudely.

The theatre played an important role in challenging the newspapers. For the most part this was achieved in performance, but George Colman the Younger wrote the following attack on newspaper scurrility in the preface to *Ways and Means; or, A Trip to Dover* (1788):

> The Calumny heap'd on individuals, in daily prints, generally convey'd with art sufficient to elude the letter of the Law, is notorious, and calls aloud for reform. The liberty of the Press is profaned by the licentiousness of the Newspapers. It becomes a sanctuary for the worst of all assassins–the assassins of private character–the manglers of reputation, and the dark murderers of the peace of families![76]

[76] George Colman the Younger, *Ways and Means; or, A Trip to Dover* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1788),

This robust defence of his scrutiny of the press makes clear that whilst the 'freedom of the press' became a mantra over the period this did not give license to the press for character assassination. We can also read Colman's preface as evidence that there was clearly an appetite to restore the stage's role as cultural mediator – the press needed regulating. Crucially, however, the preface also attacks 'those who lust for fame, and condescend to hire a despicable animal to procure it!' (p. v).

The epilogue to *Ways and Means* dramatises Colman's criticisms of the press (p.63-64). It was spoken by John Palmer in character of a news-writer, or 'vender of Scandal', named Johnny Grub. Grub explains his role: 'I'm a Critick, my masters! I sneer, splash and vapour: / Puff Part: Damn Poets: in short–- *Do* a Paper' (l.4-5). This kind of paper is completely different, of course, to the kind of paper satirised by Steele, Addison, and Fielding. Instead Grub tells us 'My Pen, like an Auctioneer's Hammer, I handle; / Knocking down Reputations by one inch of candle!' (l.7-8). Here we see the crossover between commercial activity, news writing and the cult of personality. But Grub is not done; not only does he ventriloquize the kinds of puffs that appear in the papers he also attacks the playwrights and players who court them: '[The author] Has begg'd me, just now, in a flattering tone, /To publish a *friendly Critique* of his own' (l.18-19), and 'Even Actors themselves, will extort something from us /And the vilest Performer's an Actor–-of *promise*' (l. 27-28). For this reason, Grub confesses, both he and his friends have free entry to theatre. Of course, their free entry compromises the 'freedom of the press': free tickets in exchange for good reviews. Despite criticisms of newspaper practice, the playhouse and the players were increasingly reliant on the press. Clearly, praise was beneficial, but scandalous paper wars could also turn public attention back to the playhouse. Rather than leave it alone, however, dramatists (perhaps unexpectedly) did tackle theatrical criticism on stage, and it is to that I now turn.

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p. iv-v. Further references made in text.

STAGING THEATRICAL CRITICISM

As well as attending increasingly to 'personalities', another thread running through dramatic treatments of news culture was that of responses to theatrical criticism in the papers. Though forms of theatre criticism appeared since Richard Steele's review of Thomas Betterton in *Love for Love* in *The Tatler* (No. 1, 12 April 1709), sustained attention to the stage was sporadic until the 1760s when 'theatrical intelligence' sections began to appear regularly in the daily press.[77] These paragraphs covered theatrical reviews and speculation as well as gossip about players. In response the theatre reciprocated with more discursive critiques on the press.

From the 1770s, short pieces (often called 'occasional preludes') were used to introduce special events, such as a new theatrical season or benefit performance. They could serve a similar function to Rehearsal plays; they frequently featured members of the company *in propria persona*, though there was not always an actual rehearsal. They served an explicitly promotional function. George Colman's 1772 *Occasional Prelude* for the new Covent Garden season, for instance, was an opportunity to show off the skills of new actress, Jane Barsanti, in a set up that saw a manager audition a new player.[78]

My interest lies in the engagement with the theatre's relationship with the press and the introduction of the figure of the news writer to these preludes. My sense is that their inclusion signals the press's increased importance to theatrical culture at the same time as questioning its authority. Several preludes appeared with some kind of critique on the press. For example, George Colman's *New Brooms! An Occasional Prelude* (1776) ushered in not only the new Drury Lane season, but also the first season since Garrick's retirement. The press is represented by Catcall who offers to support Phelim, who wants to be an actor: 'we must

[77] Steele, pp. 18-20.
[78] George Colman, *An Occasional Prelude, Performed at the Opening of the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden, on the Twenty-First of September, 1772* (London: T. Becket, 1776).

recommend you to the Managers, make a party with the audience, and puff you in the papers. You shall have all my interest both behind the curtain and before it'.[79] At first Phelim resists, but Catcall insists:

> Nothing to be done without such a friend as I, Phelim!—The town knows me well enough, and so do the Mangers; I give them a touch now and then in the papers. *Dramaticus* in the Chronicle, *The Observer* in the Post*, The Elephant* in the Packet, the *Drury-Lane Mouse,* and *Covent-Garden Cricket*,—all mine, Phelim!
>
> (p.17)

Catcall, it would appear, is behind much theatrical news writing. This is at once ridiculous (Catcall's obsessive news-writing not unlike the obsessive news-reading) and unsettling. This is intensified when Catcall tells Phelim 'As to the Publick, *I'll* let them know what to think of you' (p. 17). At the same time as Colman invites the audience to laugh at the ludicrousness of press coverage, a spectre of its power to influence remains. The sense of Catcall being everywhere was made manifest two days later when another Catcall appeared in Arthur Murphy's prelude to open Covent Garden theatre, *News from Parnassus* (1776).

Staging theatrical puffs and news writing continued. Henry Bate's short prelude *The Dramatic Puffers* (1782) features two hacks, Zephyr and Bill Breeze (both insubstantial air) meeting with the Author. Crossed-purposes ensue because the Author at first mistakes them for scenic decorators. On discovering that they are meeting to pitch 'puffs', he calls them parasites and exclaims: 'hence, ye rascally [xxx?] of ill founded Reputation, for however humble my Genius may move, it scorns to [sow/seat?] upon the wretched juniors of Grub Street Prostitution'.[80] This pronouncement, presumably meant to evoke a big cheer from the audience, is of course, ironic. Bate, former editor of the *Morning Post* and current editor of the *Morning Herald*, presents the pretentious 'Author', knowing that without the real-life Zephyrs and Bill

[79] George Colman the Elder, *New Brooms! An Occasional Prelude* (London: T. Becket, 1776), I.1, p.17.
[80] Henry Bate, *The Dramatic Puffers. A Prelude* (1782), on microfiche (London, British Library, MS Fiche 253/404), from unpublished manuscript (California, Huntington Library, Larpent Collection, LA583), [n.p].

Breezes, plays would not thrive. The Author's naive dismissal of the 'juniors of Grub Street' perhaps only serves to nod to their power.[81]

Flattery was another tactic. William Finney's *The Green-Room*, a prelude for Charles Bannister's Benefit at the Haymarket in 1783, includes a brief conversation between actors John Edwin and Jack Bannister (Bannister's son) on the newspapers. Jack Bannister describes the papers as the 'Body Politick of this Country' and claims, 'all the World is to be found there'.[82] On discussing 'Theatrical Business' in the press, Edwin pulls out 'the best Paper that's published' and quotes from it:

> this has been a good Season for the Hay Market – and the Performers Benefits one or two excepted have turned out very well; but what is most surprizing [sic], when an actors Night is announced the House is always thin; as if it was a Public design to prevent his getting too much by his peice [sic], and by putting Money in his Pocket turn his Ideas to Pleasure instead of Business. But this is a sort of Generosity to the ability of the Writer, that very ill suits the Necessity of the Man. For whilst the most parental Care of is exemplifying for his Genius, his Body is neglected; and as the Flesh diminishes so the Brain loses its Fertility. There is no raising a good Crop without proper manure.

Through the medium of the newspaper Edwin calls upon the audience to attend actors' benefits. Such benefits could form a significant part of a players' income.[83] He refuses to give the title of the paper claiming 'I said the best Paper that's Published–and let your own Discernment find it out. We must not puff one Print in Preference to another because in general they are all kind to us'. I have not been able to identify the paper, but the jocund tone of the exchange suggests an in-joke, which would have been recognised by several members of the audience. Dane Farnsworth Smith and M. L. Lawhon describe this prelude as 'representative of a whole

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[81] Ibid., [n.p].
[82] William Finney, *The Green-Room* (1783), on microfiche (London, British Library, F253/454), from unpublished manuscript (California, The Huntington Library, John Larpent Plays, LA635), [n.p.].
[83] Players received the profits from tickets they sold, but various charges (house fees as well as payment for any new props or lighting) were deducted from the total. Whilst there was the possibility of big sums, that was not guaranteed. For more on benefit finances see Hogan, pp. clxxv-clxxxix.

subclass of plays about players'.[84] The small but notable part of the newspaper, therefore, should not be overlooked; *The Green Room* draws attention to the role the press played not only in securing the reputation of the playhouse, but also of its players.

In David Garrick's one-act comic prelude, *The Meeting of the Company; or, Bayes's Art of Acting* (1774), written to open the 1774/75 Drury Lane season, Mr. Patent, the manager, muses on the press to his Company:

> Newspaper life, like real life, is chequered, a mixture of good and evil. What they took away yesterday they'll give again tomorrow, sometimes dead, sometimes alive. Now praise, now blame, make holes and darn 'em, can anything be more impartial?[85]

'Impartial' is, of course, a joke. None of the newspapers at this time were impartial in the modern sense – their fickleness stemmed from the fact that different people paid for paragraphs to be inserted, and one reason for this was simply novelty; a daily paper requires daily news. For Patent, the caprice somehow keeps it fair. Addressing the newspaper acknowledges the new press's role in mediating the theatrical experience. Sherman describes it as an 'oddly optimistic' commentary, but perhaps not; after all, decrying the press on stage may have been unwise.[86] More important than the sentiment is the form in which Garrick produced it – that is, in a prelude designed to drum up support for the season. At the same time Garrick neutralises its effect – he knows, of course, that money will buy a good review in the future, even if he receives a poor one now.

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[84] Dane Farnsworth Smith, *Plays About the Theatre in England, 1737-1800: Or, the Self-Conscious Stage from Foote to Sheridan*, ed. by M. L. Lawhon (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p. 157.
[85] David Garrick, *The Meeting of the Company; or, Bayes's Art of Acting,* in *The Plays of David Garrick*, ed. by Fredrick Louis Bergmann and Harry William Pedicord, 2 vols (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), II.1. l.71-74, p. 240.
[86] Sherman, 'Garrick', p. 969.

ACTRESSES, CELEBRITY AND THE NEWSPAPER ON STAGE

One conclusion from this survey of the stage's treatment of the newspaper, particularly its critique of the press as a kind of personality marketplace, is that we should not think of these plays as texts but as performances enacted by players. For actresses in particular, as I discuss in subsequent chapters, celebrity was built upon the stories that circulated about them in the press. Sometimes this meant using the repertoire to respond to news stories. Julia Fawcett points out that Mary Robinson's appearance in Elizabeth Craven's *The Miniature Picture* (1781) would have resonated with audiences familiar with a news story circulating about her lover, the Prince of Wales, giving her a miniature picture of himself.[87] I will consider the interaction between actresses' press coverage and their repertoire in more detail in Part II. First, however, I will examine the presentation of news media and female theatrical celebrity on stage. By assessing the ways in which dramatists exploited the double vision of player and part, I aim to establish key ideas about the media, the theatre and actresses in the final decades of the eighteenth century, which inform the rest of the thesis.

A key moment in the history of print media and theatre occurred in June 1774 at the Oaks, Epsom; General John Burgoyne organised a spectacular *fête champêtre*, comprising of music, singing and dancing, to celebrate the marriage of his nephew Lord Stanley (later 12th Earl of Derby) and Lady Elizabeth Hamilton. Daniel O'Quinn and Gillian Russell have scrutinized the detailed accounts about the *fête champêtre* that were published in the press; both show that the *fête champêtre* marks a significant moment in the development of print media as a crucial site of publicity and social performance.[88]

Five months later, in November 1774, with some help from David Garrick, Burgoyne

[87] Fawcett, p. 182.
[88] O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, pp. 43-62; Russell, pp. 141-43.

transformed the *fête champêtre* into *The Maid of the Oaks*, a five-act comedy staged at Drury Lane. The opening lines to the prologue, which was written by Garrick and spoken by Tom King, makes manifest the significance of the *fete champêtre* as a news event:

> Unlike to ancient Fame, all eyes, tongues, ears,
> See modern Fame, dress'd cap-a-pee [sic], appears,
> In Ledgers, Chronicles, Gazettes, and Gazetteers.[89]

King appeared as 'modern Fame' dressed head-to-toe (or, in French, cap-à-pie) in newspapers, which Russell describes as 'Garrick's attempt to capitalize on the publicity surrounding the event at the Oaks as well as asserting the capacity of theatre to mediate, and possibly discipline, publicity's excess'.[90] Beyond the visual joke of King's attire, however, there is a serious undertone: the troubling potency of the newspapers which 'all eyes, tongues, ears' are concentrated on – and captivated by. Crucial to the reception of *The Maid of the Oaks* is not only the audience's general familiarity with 'Ledgers, Chronicles, Gazettes, and Gazetteers' but also the specific coverage of the *fête champêtre*.

The *fete champêtre* and its 'remediation', to borrow O'Quinn's description, into *The Maid of the Oaks* demonstrate the extent to which print media was a new force in cultural life.[91] My interest lies in the play's call to examine celebrity culture through its frequent allusions to the press. Both the main plot and the subplot tackle the ambiguity of appearance and identity. The main plot is typical of pastoral comedy; the engagement between the simple, rustic, orphan Maria and the eligible Sir Harry Groveby is almost thwarted by her unknown parentage until her guardian, Oldworth, is revealed to be her real father. It is in the subplot, however, that Burgoyne addresses the mediation of identity through the press and the fickle nature of public reputation. Wedding guest Lady Bab Lardoon regularly features in the gossip press, though she

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[89] John Burgoyne, *The Maid of the Oaks. A New Dramatic Entertainment* (London: T. Becket, 1774), [n.p]. Future references will be made in text.
[90] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p. 144.
[91] O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, pp. 62-89.

is sanguine about the capriciousness of her presentation: 'To be complimented one day, laugh'd at the next, and abused the third; you can't imagine how amusing it is to read one's own name at breakfast in a morning paper' (II.1, p.24).

Lady Bab displays forensic understanding of newspaper commentary:

> LADY BAB: They first began with a modest innuendo [sic], *"we hear a certain Lady, not a hundred miles from Hanover Square, lost, at one sitting, some nights ago, two thousand guineas–O tempora! O mores!"*
> OLDWORTH: (*laughing*) Pray, Lady Bab, is this concluding ejaculation your own, or was it the Printer's?
> LADY BAB: His, you may be sure; a dab of Latin adds surprizing force to a paragraph, besides shewing the learning of the author.
> OLDWORTH: Well, but really I don't see such a great matter in this; why should you suppose any body applied this paragraph to you?
> LADY BAB: None but my intimates did, for it was applicable to half St. George's parish; but about a week after they honoured me with initials and italicks: "It is said, Lady B. L's ill success still continues at the quinze table: it was observed, the same Lady appeared yesterday at court, in a *ribband collier*, having laid aside her *diamond* necklace, (diamond in italicks) as totally bourgeoise and unnecessary for the dress of a woman of fashion."
> OLDWORTH: To be sure this *was* advancing a little in *familiarity*.
> LADY BAB: At last, to my infinite amusement, out I came at full length: "*Lady Bab. Lardoon has tumbled down three nights successively*; a certain *colonel has done the same*, *and we hear that both parties keep house with sprained ancles* [sic]".
>
> (II.1, p.25-26)

Lady Bab captures the sense of paragraph culture here. She undermines the newspapers' cultural authority by ventriloquizing their stylistic features; she gently pokes fun at the expected formula of paragraphs from the typography to the Latin expression. By claiming that the story is 'applicable to half St. George's parish' she undercuts any sense of personal attack and instead revels in the notoriety.

The Lady Bab who is paragraphed in the newspapers is not the same as the Lady Bab in the play: stage and page have different registers. Given that the newspapers were a rival form of entertainment to the stage, the idea that the 'stage' Lady Bab is the real character and the 'newspaper' Lady Bab a fabrication recalls the sense that the theatre was a superior medium to

the press that was key to the earlier 'quidnunc' comedies. Burgoyne here reminds the audience that the impression of public figures (many of whom were in his social circle) given in the newspaper is ultimately hollow.

For O'Quinn this scene shows that Lady Bab 'is theoretically cognizant of the way reputation and desire rely on the artifice of representation' and that the 'audience is hailed repeatedly into a similar analytical position'.[92] By encouraging laughter at the newspapers Burgoyne reignites the role of the theatre as a site to police the periodical press. But unlike readers earlier in the century, when the periodical press was in its infancy, the newspapers were firmly established and attracted readers through their scandalous rumours. The laughing audience might well also consume the stories that Lady Bab mocks; they laugh, then, perhaps at their own credulity or laugh at others more credulous than them.

The play repeatedly invites the viewer to be aware of the actress playing Lady Bab: in its first production, Frances Abington, for whom the role was reportedly written.[93] At one point, Lady Bab invites Oldworth to observe her tricking Dupeley into thinking she is a shepherdess, and says to him: 'you see what an excellent actress I should have made, if fortune had not unluckily brought me into the world an Earl's daughter' (III.3, p.42). The actress and the Earl's daughter are denied co-existence and in that same moment that they are embodied by the same person: actress, character, and fashionable lady collapse into one another. Lady Bab, as Russell points out, is 'essentially an adaptation of the 'Abington' familiar to audiences from epilogues'.[94] Like her fictional counterpart, Abington was the subject of considerable press attention. The capacity for the newspapers to confer 'modern Fame' on both a woman like Lady Bab, and the actress who plays characters like Lady Bab, reminds us of the potential threat of print media; a threat facilitated by the newspapers and embodied by the actress playing Lady

[92] Ibid., p. 69 and 70.
[93] Russell, *Women, Sociability and the Theatre*, p. 148.
[94] Ibid.

Bab.

As in the portraits, in which actresses were increasingly presented indistinguishably from aristocratic ladies, newspaper coverage enhanced the slippage between these women and acted as a powerful agent in the process of transforming social relations and social standing. Ultimately, however, this is yet another illusion of the press's virtual space. The shared strategies for depicting actresses and aristocrats appears to create a kind of levelling effect, but whilst aristocrats were conferred status due to their rank, actresses increasingly relied on the press for their public role.

The stage continued to explore the role of the media in transforming actresses into celebrities. This often happened during epilogues, usually written for and spoken by an actress, in which she often appeared *in propria persona*, fostering a continuing myth of intimacy. We have seen in the epilogue of *Ways and Means* that these kinds of texts were spaces in which themes extraneous to the main plot could be discussed, and a player could speak directly to the audience. The epilogue provided a strange space where speaker and character were especially blurred. In Edward Topham's epilogue to Richard Cumberland's *The Natural Son* (1784) the speaker (Elizabeth Farren) comments on the audience's delegation of judgement to the newspapers:

> *Honest* John Bull—*before a sturdy elf—*
> *Now claims no right of judging for himself*;
> *To* PUFFS *from Theatres gives up his vote*,
> *And kindly thinks all* true *–-because 'tis wrote*'.[95]
> (l.19-22)

There is a parallel here with the General Election, which had taken place earlier that year. That too had been heavily covered in the newspapers and, like theatrical reviews, was potentially compromised by biased news.

[95] Richard Cumberland, *The Natural Son* (London: C. Dilly and G. Nicol, 1785), pp. 83-84. Line references in text.

Topham caricatures the kind of puffs that appeared in the press:

> *—And while you clamber o'er the empty rows,*
> *In sweet* ADVERTISEMENT*—the House o'erflows!*
> *Puff is the word: where fame is* not *a breath:*
> *—How many an Actress Puff has sav'd from death!*
> *And Actors for whom Mutes were full enough,*
> *Have risen* ALEXANDERS*—from a Puff!*
> *While generous paragraphs, all-lavish give*
> *Sums Total, which our Treasurers ne'er receive*.
> (l.27-34)

The speaker acknowledges the exaggeration and false information spouted by the newspapers, but also admits that the Puff 'has sav'd' the players. This is important: players' reputations were built not only through their performances but also the mediation of those performances to the reading public. The epilogue ends with the speaker giving '*A sketch of what some pens may say tomorrow?*' (l.42). This puff conceit enables Topham to end the epilogue in high praise of the actors, which perfectly serves the purpose of drumming up support for the play (the purpose of the epilogue):

> *The Actors all—were wonderfully clever;*
> *The lives was never seen, nor heard—no never.*
> *Miss Farren's widow*—above all—d'ye see,
> *Was*—YOU *must fill that vacancy for* ME!
> (l.51-54)

To see Farren the speaker adopt the voice of a newspaper to praise Farren the actress blurs speaker, actress and the media that circulates information about the stage and its stars. She stands (almost) praising herself – a joke that hints at the actresses' role (alongside authors, managers and other theatre stakeholders) in self-promotion through paying for puffs, but also acknowledges the audience's role.

Newspaper responses to the epilogue illuminate the perceived interactivity between press and playhouse. The *Whitehall Evening Post* (21-23 December 1784) took it in good humour: 'if we may judge from the applause it received–all the wonted merit of his [Topham]

performances. To say more–would be to incur that satire so well levelled in it–at the *genera* [sic] of Puffs, and the particular species of theatric ones'. It continues by praising Farren as without rival, excepting her own self. By praising the epilogue this paper chooses not to be openly bruised by the satire, but a warning remains; if they are to be attacked, they will not 'say more' again. By contrast, the *Gazetteer* (23 December 1784) tempers its praise: 'with very indiscreet wit it exposed to ridicule the practice of the Theatres […] The houses should surely keep their own secret'. The *Gazetteer* here wilfully misconstrues the attack on playhouse and press as only on the playhouse. The *Morning Chronicle* (23 December 1784) does not pretend to be so naïve, declaring that there was 'rather too much ridicule is directed in it against the paragraphs and advertisements that come professedly from the theatres'. Newspapers' self-defence is to be expected, but Topham's epilogue does not necessarily condemn either party, but rather draws attention to the complicity of the press, playhouse and, crucially, the public in the shared deceit. The epilogue, and the responses to it, also makes clear that any finger wagging is fruitless, so co-dependent are the mediums.

The theatrical celebrity emerges from within this environment. I have shown in this chapter theatrical responses to the rise of news culture and attempts to regulate it through satire. At the same time, the cult of personality made the press increasingly important not only as a source for drama, but to the success of the individuals on the stage. Both press and playhouse navigated a new era of celebrity, and both played a part in making sense of this new cultural power. Crucially, and we forget this in error, they were both forms of entertainment as well as mediators. The 'characters' of real people could be staged in the theatre and also fictionalised in the press to willing audiences. The celebrity could appear out of nowhere and straight on stage and on the page. This was a far cry from the origins of the newspaper at the start of the eighteenth century – now both stage and the press could make fictions of everyone. In the next chapter I reverse the investigation and explore the theatre in the news

CHAPTER 2: THEATRICAL INTELLIGENCE: THEATRE IN THE NEWS

Chapter 1 investigated theatrical responses to the emergent news culture across the eighteenth century. Here I examine things from the opposite perspective: how the theatre figured in the news. Theatrical news content has been largely overlooked; only Charles Harold Gray's *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795* (1931) provides an extensive treatment of the development of review culture, though he discredits most early material as not 'any critical literature worth considering' and largely ignores theatrical gossip altogether.[1] More recent interventions in the field from Brian Cowan, Stuart Sherman, and Ruth Scobie have begun the process of rethinking press coverage and its importance for celebrity-making.[2]

I suggest that the writing dismissed by John Brewer as 'mere puffery' is actually crucial to understanding the development of celebrity, particularly the turning of lead actresses into media stars.[3] In terms of celebrity, distinguishing between highbrow and lowbrow theatrical content in newspapers is unhelpful – for contemporary readers such a distinction was not clear and, moreover, all kinds of content informed the reception of plays and players. Interest in theatrical criticism is bound up with increasingly intense interest in the players themselves, which spilled out of their onstage characters and into their private lives. This chapter traces the history of theatre in the news, including idle gossip and puffery, over the eighteenth century and outlines the specific mediascape from the 1770s within which the actresses I examine in Part II worked.

Though news writing has existed for centuries, a recognisable newspaper form began

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[1] Charles Harold Gray, *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), pp. 225-26.
[2] Sherman, 'Garrick'; Cowan, 'News'; Scobie.
[3] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 340.

in England in the seventeenth century, though legal restriction stymied the expansion of the press until the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. [4] It would be incorrect, however, to assume this lapse constituted a 'free press' without government interference; not only did various administrations hold stakes in papers, but also Jeremy Black shows that the Stamp Act of 1712 and the subsequent duty increases in 1725, 1757, and 1776, were politically motivated, as well as revenue-raising.[5] Despite such interventions, daily, tri-weekly and weekly newspapers proliferated over the course of the century.

The first daily paper, the *Daily Courant*, appeared on 11 March 1702 and remained the sole daily for almost two decades. Only a single side of a sheet, it contained extracts from foreign presses with the promise that the 'Author' would 'give his Extracts fairly and impartially' and not 'give any Comments or Conjectures of his own, but will relate only Matter of Fact'. Content remained largely focused on global affairs though to its final number on 28 June 1735 (no. 6002). Not only did it expand in size over this period, but also in the nature of its content; prices of stock, advertisements, dedicated London news, notices on illness, deaths and upcoming births as well as news of the Court and Treasury added to foreign politics.[6] Though still a way off from the widespread cultural and fashionable news that proliferated from the 1770s onwards, newspapers were a growing industry.

[4] Cowan, 'News', pp. 7-8; Cowan, *Social Life of Coffee*, pp. 211-12.
[5] Black, p. 107.
[6] The *Daily Courant* re-emerged the following week as the pro-Walpole *Daily Gazetteer*.



Numb.

The Daily Courant.

Wednesday, March 11. 1702.

From the Harlem Courant, Dated March 18. N. S.

Naples, Feb. 22.

ON Wednesday last, our New Viceroy, the Duke of Efcalona, arriv'd here with a Squadron of the Galleys of Sicily. He made his Entrance dreft in a French habit; and to give us the greatest Hopes of the King's coming hither, went to Lodge in one of the little Palaces, leaving the Royal one for his Majesty. The Marquis of Grigni is alfo arriv'd here with a Regiment of French.

Rome, Feb. 25. In a Military Congregation of State that was held here, it was Refolv'd to draw a Line from Afcoli to the Borders of the Eccleſiaſtical State, thereby to hinder the Incurſions of the Tranſalpine Troops. Orders are ſent to Civita Vecchia to fit out the Galleys, and to ſtrengthen the Garriſon of that Place. Signior Caſali is made Governor of Perugia. The Marquis del Vaſto, and the Prince de Caſerta continue ſtill in the Imperial Embaſſador's Palace; where his Excellency has a Guard of 50 Men every Night in Arms. The King of Portugal has deſir'd the Arch-Biſhoprick of Lisbon, vacant by the Death of Cardinal Souſa, for the Infante his ſecond Son, who is about 11 Years old.

Vienna, Mar. 4. Orders are ſent to the 4 Regiments of Foot, the 2 of Cuiraſſiers, and to that of Dragoons, which are broke up from Hungary, and are on their way to Italy, and which conſiſt of about 14 or 15000 Men, to haſten their March thither with all Expedition. The 6 new Regiments of Huſſars that are now raiſing, are in ſo great a forwardneſs, that they will be compleat, and in a Condition to march by the middle of May. Prince Lewis of Baden has written to Court, to excuſe himſelf from coming thither, his Preſence being ſo very neceſſary, and ſo much deſir'd on the Upper-Rhine.

Francfort, Mar. 12. The Marquiſs d' Uxelles is come to Stra-burg, and is to draw together a Body of ſome Regiments of Horſe and Foot from the Garriſons of Alſace; but will not leſſen thoſe of Stra-burg and Landau, which are already very weak. On the other hand, the Troops of His Imperial Majeſty, and his Allies, are going to form a Body near Germerſheim in the Palatinate, of which Place, as well as of the Lines at Spires, Prince Lewis of Baden is expected to take a View, in three or four days. The Engliſh and Dutch Miniſters, the Count of Friſe, and the Baron Vander Meer, and likewiſe the Imperial Envoy Count Lowenſtein, are gone to Nordlingen, and it is hop'd that in a ſhort time we ſhall hear from thence of ſome favourable Reſolutions for the Security of the Empire.

Liege, Mar. 14. The French have taken the Canon de Longie, who was Secretary to the Dean de Mean, out of our Caſtle, where he has been for ſome time a Priſoner, and have deliver'd him to the Provoſt of Maubeuge, who has carry'd him from hence, but we do not know whither.

Paris, Mar. 13. Our Letters from Italy ſay, That moſt of our Reinforcements were Landed there; that the Imperial and Eccleſiaſtical Troops ſeem to live very peaceably with one another in the Country of Parma, and that the Duke of Vendome, as he was viſiting ſeveral Poſts, was within 100 Paces of falling into the Hands of the Germans. The Duke of Chartres, the Prince of Conti, and ſeveral other Princes of the Blood, are to make the Campaign in Flanders under the Duke of Burgundy; and the Duke of Maine is to Command upon the Rhine.

From the Amſterdam Courant, Dated Mar. 18.

Rome, Feb. 25. We are taking here all poſſible Precautions for the Security of the Eccleſiaſtical State in this preſent Conjuncture, and have deſir'd to raiſe 3000 Men in the Cantons of Switzerland. The Pope has appointed the Duke of Berwick to be his Lieutenant-General, and he is to Command 6000 Men on the Frontiers of Naples: He has alſo ſettled upon him a Penſion of 6000 Crowns a year during Life.

From the Paris Gazette, Dated Mar. 18. 1702.

Naples, Febr. 17. 600 French Soldiers are arrived here, and are expected to be follow'd by 3400 more. A Courier that came hither on the 14th. has brought Letters by which we are aſſur'd that the King of Spain deſigns to be here towards the end of March; and accordingly Orders are given to make the neceſſary Preparations againſt his Arrival. The two Troops of Horſe that were Commanded to the Abruzzo are poſted at Pescara with a Body of Spaniſh Foot, and others in the Fort of Montorio.

Paris, March. 18. We have Advice from Toulon of the 5th inſtant, that the Wind having long ſtood favourable, 22000 Men were already ſail'd for Italy, that 2500 more were Embarking, and that by the 15th it was hoped they might all get thither. The Count d' Eſtrees arriv'd there on the Third inſtant, and ſet all hands at work to fit out the Squadron of 9 Men of War and ſome Fregats, that are appointed to carry the King of Spain to Naples. His Catholick Majeſty will go on Board the *Thunderer*, of 110 Guns.

We have Advice by an Expreſs from Rome of the 18th of February, That notwithſtanding the preſſing Inſtances of the Imperial Embaſſadour, the Pope had Condemn'd the Marquis del Vaſto to loſe his Head and his Eſtate to be confiscated, for not appearing to Anſwer the Charge againſt him of Publickly Scandalizing Cardinal Janſon.

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IT will be found from the Foreign Prints, which from time to time, as Occaſion offers, will be mention'd in this Paper, that the Author has taken Care to be daily furniſh'd with all that comes from Abroad in any Language. And for an Aſſurance that he will not, under Pretence of having Private Intelligence, impoſe any Additions of feign'd Circumſtances to an Action, but give his Extracts fairly and impartially; at the beginning of each Article he will quote the Foreign Paper from whence 'tis taken, that the Publick, ſeeing from what Country a piece of News comes with the Allowance of that Government, may be better able to Judge of the Credibility and Fairneſs of the Relation: Nor will he take upon him to give any Comments or Conjectures of his own, but will relate only Matter of Fact; ſuppoſing other People to have Senſe enough to make Reflections for themſelves.

This Courant (as the Title ſhews) will be Publiſh'd Daily: being deſign'd to give all the Material News as ſoon as every Poſt arrives: and is conſin'd to half the Compaſs, to ſave the Publick at leaſt half the Impertinences, of ordinary News-Papers.

LONDON. Sold by *E. Mallet*, next Door to the *King's-Arms* Tavern at *Fleet-Bridge*.

Figure 1 *The Daily Courant*, 11 March 1702 © 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers [Gale]



The Daily Courant.

Numb. 5303

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 1735.

Petersburgh, May 18. N. S.

UPON Advice of ſome Differences having ariſen between General Lacy and the Count de Munich, Field Marſhal of the Emperor, which retarded the Paſſage of Troops entering Silesia, to go to the Emperor's Aſſiſtance, the Court has recontiled thoſe Differences, and ſent Orders to General Lacy to put himſelf forthwith upon the March with the firſt Column, compoſed of 8 Regiments of Foot, making 13,282 Men. Therefore 'tis they will enter Silesia the 12th of next Month, and be ſoon followed by the ſecond Column, conſiſting of 8 Regiments of Dragoons, and 7 of Foot, amounting to 17,782 effective Men: Thoſe Troops will be commanded in Chief by General Lacy, who is to have under him Lieutenant-General Keith, and the Major Generals Ursfow and Biron. The Tranquility being at preſent re-eſtabliſhed, as well in Poland as Lithuania, by the Retreat of the Palatine of Lublin and the Regimentary Pociey, and the Submiſſion of the Poliſh Troops to King Auguſtus, the Court has reſolved to begin to withdraw the Ruſſian Troops out of that Kingdom, and particularly the Coſſacks. M. de Sommerfeck, Colonel in the Service of the Duke of Brunſwick Wolfenbuttle, and Miniſter of his Serene Highneſs, had Yeſterday a private Audience of the Czarina, wherein he delivered to her Majeſty the Collar of the Order of St. Andrew, with which the late Duke of Wolfenbuttle was inveſted. The Deputies of the City of Dantzick had alſo Yeſterday their Audience of Leave of her Majeſty, when M. Wahl, Burgomaſter of that City, was their Speaker, and harangued that Princeſs for a quarter of an Hour with great Eloquence, and a general Applauſe. The Court has given thoſe Deputies to underſtand in general Terms, that her Czarian Majeſty was inclined to deſiſt from Part of her Pretenſions upon the City of Dantzick, but without explaining in what Sum that Favour ſhould conſiſt.

Mitau, June 2. N. S. M. Rofinowski is arrived here from Koningsberg, with ſome other Poliſh Gentlemen, to make their Submiſſion to the King; and it is reported, that Count Przezki, Staroſt of Beitz, and M. Raſzyuski have written to the Chancellor of Lithuania, that as ſoon as they were provided with proper Paſſes, they would ſet out for Warſaw; and 'tis ſaid that thoſe Paſſes were ſent them accordingly. The laſt Advices from Lithuania mention, that M. Colcis, Judge of the Army of that Duchy, had obliged a ſmall Body of Poliſh Troops, that retired towards Inerlich, to lay down their Arms; and that General Ismailow was cloſely purſuing the five Companies remaining ſtill in Lithuania under the Conduct of M. Maſſalski. M. Chevalier, the King's Cabinet-Courier, who was ſent to Conſtantinople with his Majeſty's Preſents to the Grand Seignior, it returned from thence. He had the Honour to be preſented to their Majeſties, and to give them an Account of the Diſpoſitions of the Ottoman Porte, which appear extremely favourable to the King's Intereſt. The Prime Vizier having declared, that his Highneſs perſiſted in his Reſolution of maintaining a good Under-ſtanding with the Czarina, and the Emperor, and not to concern himſelf one way or other with the Affairs of Poland. Father Arcelli, Clerk Regular, who two Years ago was nominated by the Court of Spain in Quality of Miniſter to the Republick of Poland, let out this Day with Father Salaroli, of the ſame Order: He was forbid to take the Route of Dantzick; and as he could not obtain a Paſs from the King, nor Count Wratislaw, his demanded a Guard as far as the Frontiers of the Dominions of the King of Pruſſia, which was granted him at the Inſtances of ſome Foreign Miniſters: He goes from hence to Berlin. The youngeſt Daughter of Prince Lubinski, Caſtellan of Sendomir, is declared Lady of Honour to the Queen. Count Leyski was married on Tueſday laſt to Mademoiſelle Dylaky, Daughter to the late Count Dylaky, Marſhal of the Court. The Nuptials were celebrated with great Magnificence, whereat ſeveral Senators and Perſons of Diſtinction were preſent.

Hanover, June 14. N. S. Yeſterday the King our Sovereign came hither: His Majeſty arrived an Hour late, and then returned to Herrenhauſen. This Day the two Battalions of Guards paſſed in Review before the King, who appeared extremely well ſatisfy'd with the Beauty of that Corps, and the Dexterity with which they performed their Exerciſes. Count Kinsk, the Emperor's Ambaſſador, is arrived here with the Countels his Spouſe; and his Excellency has been at Herrenhauſen to make his Court to his Majeſty, who received him in a very gracious Manner. The King continues to dine every Day in Publick: when he ſits down to the Table, there is only one Arm Chair, and one Cover upon the Table; but as ſoon as he is ſeated, he makes a Sign to the Guards, whole Chairs are brought to the Table, and they have the Honour to dine and ſup with his Majeſty.

Gottenburgh, June 11. N. S. Yeſterday M. Titley, Reſident of the King of Great Britain at this Court, for our Intereſt at Hamburgh and Britannick Majeſty at Herrenhauſen. The Placart for eſtabliſhing a new Chamber at Cottorp, has been publiſhed and ſent into the Dutchy of Holſtein; in purſuance whereof, the Gid Chamber is to open her Seſſions on Midſummer-Day next. The Margrave of Culmbach is conſtituted Preſident of the ſame: All Civil Affairs are under his Cognizance; but thoſe which regard the Finances, or the Reviſion of Accompts, are to be ſent to the Chamber of Accompts here.

Dreſden, June 10. N. S. Our Magiſtracy have cauſed the Citizens to meet, to communicate to them the Order, which they received from the King our Sovereign, to demand of them 80,000 Crowns for the Expences of the Barracks, which have been built for the Garriſon of this City, and 40,000 per Ann. for the Maintainance of that Garriſon, which henceforth will not be chargeable to the Citizens. Several Waggons loaded with Hungarian Wines are arrived here, and will forthwith be ſent to the Court of Warſaw: from whence the laſt Letters advis'd, that the Lords and Gentlemen of the oppoſite Party ſubmitting to the King, become daily more numerous; and that it was not doubted, but the Tranquility of the Kingdom would be ſoon re-eſtabliſhed.

Hamburg, June 10. N. S. The Burghers of this City met yeſterday, and gave their Conſent to ſome Taxes for maintaining the Foot and other Occaſions. This City has nominated Deputies to go and compliment his Britannick Majeſty upon his happy Arrival in his German Dominions. We learn from Copenhagen, that the Negociations of our Deputies at the Court of Denmark, form again to be ſuſpended. The ſale of the Merchandizes on board the Hanburgh Ships, has, however, been deferred for ſome time, upon their Inſtances with the Daniſh Miniſtry. 'Tis added, that a Frigate was equipping, deſigned, as it is ſaid, to cruize in Iceland. It is written from Thorn, that the Prieſts for out there the 28 Inſtant for Poſtuak, guarded by ſome Ruſſian Troops.

Hamburg, June 7. N. S. The Deputies of our Regency at Copenhagen wrote to our Magiſtracy, that they endeavoured to have regulated, in 8 or 10 Days time, the Privileges and Conditions of the Accommodation with the Court of Denmark. The unhappy Situation of the Affairs of Duke Charles-Leopold of Mecklenburg, have occaſioned that Prince's falling into a languiſhing Condition.

From the Upper-Rhine, June 8. N. S. Prince Eugene of Savoy is upon his Guard not to be ſurpriſed in Piemont. It was with that View, that the March of the Troops of the Empire towards the Neckars, was deferred for ſome Days. 'Tis reported, that Part of it only will march thither; and that a large Body of Troops, both Horſe and Foot, will be left at hand to cover the Dutchy of Wirtemberg. The Paſſage of the Imperial Troops over the Neckar appears the more certain, becauſe the Pontoons bought of the King of Pruſſia have been ſent for from Frankfort; and it is ſaid, that that Paſſage will be followed by

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EDWARD V. in Weſtminſter Abbey.
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Figure 2 *The Daily Courant*, 18 June 1735 © 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers [Gale]

The sheer number of daily titles that were launched over the century indicates the demand; major dailies were launched as follows: the *Daily Post* (1719), *Daily Journal* (1721), *Daily Advertiser* (1730/1), *General Advertiser* (1734), *Public Advertiser* (1752), *Public Ledger* (1760), *Morning Chronicle* (1769), *Morning Post* (1772), *Morning Herald* (1780), *The Times* (1785) – originally *The Daily Universal Register*, the *World* (1788), *The Diary; or, Woodfall's Register* (1789) and the *Oracle* (1792). To these were added numerous tri-weekly, weekly and monthly periodicals. Though many were short-lived, some titles remain extant. Many changed names and hands, which make their histories complex, but nevertheless the number serves to show the richness of eighteenth-century periodical press culture – and it was set to change.

The 1737 Licensing Act changed the relationship between press and playhouse. It ordered all new plays to be subject to licensing from the Lord Chamberlain in order to police both political and vulgar content.[7] The result was that spoken-word drama was carefully constructed to hide obvious verbal dissent (though strategies for undocumented gesture could not be pre-censored). Periodicals were not subject to pre-publication censorship; in part this meant that they could make explicit criticisms whilst the stage could not. But it also raised the importance of the press as a means to guide theatrical reception or extend the conversation beyond the performance; it was, after all, in the years after the Licensing Act that theatrical content in the news accelerated.[8] Another effect, particularly salient to this study, proposed by both Shearer West and Michael Kinservik, was the emergence of the 'age of the actor'.[9] It was not, however, until the introduction of print gossip into the news that the celebrity actor would appear.

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[7] For the effect of the Licensing Act on drama see Kinservik, *Disciplining Satire*, pp. 95-133; David Thomas, 'The 1737 Licensing Act and Its Impact', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832,* ed. by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 91-106.

[8] On press responses to censored plays see Matthew J. Kinservik, 'The Dialectics of Print and Performance after 1737', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832,* ed. by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 123-39 (pp. 129-34).

[9] Kinservik, *Disciplining Satire*, pp. 96-120; West, pp. 2 and 5-6; Thomas, p. 102.

FASHIONABLE INTELLIGENCE; OR, GOSSIP

Though news content had been expanding for several decades, two men instigated decisive shifts in the substance of newspapers in the 1770s. William Woodfall, editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, and brother and son to editor and former editor of the *Public Advertiser*, introduced regular parliamentary reporting, with much opposition from Parliament, as well as consistent theatre criticism.[10] By contrast, Henry Bate popularised the presence of unsubstantiated scandal and gossip; his paper, *The Morning Post*, was 'utterly new'.[11] For both press and playhouse, as we shall see, these interventions set the backdrop to the media scene which underpinned emerging celebrity culture. The general impact cannot be overstated either, as O'Quinn contends: 'The kind of daily paper that dominated the print public sphere after the emergence of the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Post* needs to be understood as a new medium'.[12] This is not a viewpoint from the perspective of hindsight; according to James Boswell, Samuel Johnson wrote in 1773 that 'Of all publick transactions the whole world is now informed by the news-papers' and resisted the urge to visit the infamous Margaret Caroline Rudd because 'they have now a trick of putting every thing in the news-papers''.[13] Whether or not activity really was marshalled by concerns about press exposure, Johnson's comment demonstrates his alertness to a new kind of press.

Before turning to the development of theatrical news in particular, what follows outlines the broader content of the daily papers from the 1770s, which were now four pages in length. A small snapshot of typical content will give an impression of the richness of newspapers; they contained all kinds of advertisements (including books, cosmetics, auctions, maids, and other

[10] On the history of parliamentary reporting see Ian Harris, 'Publishing Parliamentary Oratory: The Case of Edmund Burke', *Parliamentary History,* 26 (2007), 112-30; John Vice and Stephen Farrell, *The History of Hansard* (London: House of Lords Hansard and the House of Lords Library, 2017).
[11] Werkmeister, pp. 19-21; see also Darnton (paras. 6 and 7 of 13).
[12] O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, p. 17.
[13] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by David Womersley (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 371, 561.

miscellaneous goods), business and financial notices, racing news, Court gossip, births, marriages and deaths, political accounts and sartorial reports.[14] There was creative content too; topical poetry and epigrams regularly featured, as well as extracts from new books (and serialised novels appeared in monthly magazines). Newspapers were a guide to fashionable, social, cultural and political life in the second half of the century.

Though materials were increasingly organised under section headings (such as 'Intelligence' sections for parliament, theatre, opera, masquerades, and sport), they were largely a blur of information with no headlines. There is rarely coherence between paragraphs. We might speculate too that sometimes the jumble of news had a planned effect. Even if it were not intentional, newspapers' content was charged with ambiguities with scope for readers to misunderstand or editors to mislead; this is hinted at in the nonsensical 'cross-readings' prologue to *The School for Arrogance* (see Chapter 1).

We see examples of the cluttered and various appearance of newspapers in the period. The images below show the four pages of the *Morning Post* in the mid-1770s, which are significantly different from the *Daily Courant* at the start of the century. A brief description will showcase the variety of features, albeit heavily dominated by adverts, that comprised a daily newspaper. The front page includes many advertisements such as a playbill for Tom King's benefit at Drury Lane, as well as for products such as Jamaican rum, medicine for gout, and a list of clothing sold by a 'taylor' [sic]. There are also letters from correspondents including a 'CARD to Mrs. YATES' which spreads a rumour about her rude behaviour in the green room. The second page includes parliamentary reports from the House of Commons, 'Theatrical Intelligence' and 'Oratorical Intelligence'. The rest of the page is filled with unrelated paragraphs; including a report that Frances Abington's 'abrupt retiring' from the

[14] For details about advertising practices see Peter M. Briggs, '"News from the Little World": A Critical Glance at Eighteenth-Century British Advertising', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture,* 23 (1994), 29-45.

theatre was due to ‘indisposition’, accounts of recent murders, burglaries and trials, as well as birth, marriages and death notices. More adverts fill page three, including what we would now call ‘classified’ advertisements. The fourth (and final) page features an epitaph by ‘T.L’, another letter to the editor, an open letter to Lord Mansfield, a notice complaining that people are ‘carrying off’ newspapers from coffee-houses, as well as a range of ‘Useful Intelligence’ comprising of bankrupt notices, shipping news and stock prices.

The term ‘creative’ best captures the nature of much newspaper content. Newspapers invited correspondence from the public, and lengthy exchanges on political or cultural events were not uncommon – many correspondents pronounced themselves ‘constant’ theatre attendees, thereby assuming some kind of authority. Some of these exchanges spilled into other papers as a means of commentating on a rival press. The *World* (3 January 1787) signalled its popularity in its third number by claiming that ‘our letter boxes–overflowing’; whether or not this was true is less important than the idea that this was a mark of a successful paper. The editors not only printed letters, but also engaged in dialogues with their correspondents: the ‘To Correspondents’ column signalled the receipt of letters and promoted forthcoming submissions. It also rejected offerings; for example, the *Morning Chronicle* (13 May 1772) complained ‘*The letter, with the Extract from a pamphlet, should be paid for*’ whilst *The Times* (2 January 1786) wrote “The Essay of *Rufus* is too long for a Newspaper; our object is to give variety’.



Figure 3 *Morning Post*, 8 March 1775 © 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers [Gale]

To not print something, but to describe it, could sometimes suffice too; perhaps to avoid libel, to appear to be generous or to entertain. An example is the following comment in the *Morning Post* (23 September 1774) regarding a letter about actress Mary Ann Yates:

> *A Celebrated actress, Mrs. Y–, having been sufficiently lampooned on account of the trifling accident that befel [sic] her at Covent-garden Theatre some time since, we must beg to decline inserting any thing further on that subject, and hope this will be accepted as a proper apology by our old Correspondent, who has sent us a second edition, with improvements, concerning certain WATER WORKS.*

Without actually printing the letter, the paper renewed interest in a previous news story in which Yates had been embroiled the year before.[15] As well as demonstrating the kinds of exchanges carried on in the newspapers, this episode evinces newspapers' power as 'cultural memory banks' – the *Morning Post* was able to re-circulate and re-mediate old news and make it current. This small illustration of exchanges with correspondents serves to show that newspapers were engaged in a dialogue with their readers, which created a kind of 'virtual' coffee house. The press did not therefore simply print news but facilitated cultural conversation too.

It is difficult to establish whether individual letters were real or fabricated by editors as they were often signed with a pseudonym. In fact, much newspaper content cannot easily be traced; anyone could pay to insert an anonymous paragraph, and so assessment of either truthful or biased reporting is somewhat anachronistic. Since much content was reproduced in other papers, it is similarly hard to trace the source. The reproductions of course further amplified particular ideas.

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[15] Yates had been employed by Covent Garden during the 1772/3 season, which she quit following a salary dispute, for which she received bad press. She returned to appear as Margaret of Anjou in *Earl of Warwick* for William 'Gentleman' Smith's benefit. The announcement of her arrival in town resulted in more negative press; three letters from 'SCORPION' in the *Morning Post* (17,19 and 21 April 1773) were particularly scathing, and another from 'Theatricus' (19 April 1773), which claimed she and her husband had 'demanded' high wages 'either by yourselves, or writers hired for you, in the Morning Chronicle, the beginning of this winter'. She was not friendless, however; another correspondent in the *Morning Post* (21 April 1773) complained about 'the falsities in SCORPION's letters'.

Whether we can substantiate the information or not, newspapers circulated ideas about the theatre and its personnel that gained credence simply by being published. Newspaper letters could be used to 'puff' a particular person or to destroy reputations. Though this was important politically and to fashionable society, it was also significant for other cultural institutions. In 1795, Joseph Farington's diary reveals that he and other members of the Royal Academy, frustrated by the 'general abuse of newspapers', agreed to 'prevent [it] if possible' by paying them off, with the 'expense [sic] to be borne under the article advertisements'.[16] Though scurrilous paragraphs could be entertainment, there were potential risks of bad press for institutions as well as individuals.

Before proceeding to examine the development of specifically theatrical news-writing, it is worth reiterating that readers read about the theatre and its stars alongside the content discussed above, and in dialogue with other media, like the graphic satire that had much traffic with the press, and so their celebrity profiles were created in correspondence (or at least side by side) with seemingly unrelated content. The image below from the *Morning Post* (24 April 1780) shows a letter about Elizabeth Younge from 'Theatricus' close by a poem addressed to a 'Tribe of Old Maids', a letter to Charles James Fox from 'Justice' and a range of business notices and adverts:

[16] Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. by Kenneth Garlick, et al., 8 vols. (London and New Haven: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1998), I, p. 98.



Figure 4 *Morning Post* (24 April 1780) © 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers [Gale]

There are useful parallels to be drawn from the research into the interaction of political and newspaper cultures, not least because the story of political news, particularly parliamentary reporting, is entwined with the emergence of media interest in both the theatre and personalities. Like theatrical events, parliamentary proceedings were subject to increased documentation in the press, owing largely to the editorial innovations of William Woodfall. Woodfall has been described by Lucyle Werkmeister as 'one of the most respectable' journalists of his time', and by Daniel O'Quinn as 'arguably the most sophisticated popular critic of theatrical culture'.[17]

Hannah Barker argues that 'it seems evident that eighteenth-century Britain witnessed

[17] Werkmeister, p. 22; O'Quinn, *Entertaining*, p. 235.

the emergence of a dynamic extra-parliamentary political culture' in which the newspaper played a vital part.[18] I borrow Barker's concept here to suggest that the newspapers enabled an 'extra-theatrical' community to participate in theatrical culture. It is also worth considering the similarities in their reportage. As has been discussed by Christopher Reid and David Francis Taylor, descriptions of parliamentary proceedings were necessarily truncated in order to condense several hours into a few columns, which means that the impression given is partial and mediated through the writer.[19] So too, theatrical commentary does not 'capture' a performance in any meaningful sense, but rather mediates a particular perspective promoted by the reviewer; from the viewpoint of one critic we might have a lengthy description of an actresses' dress, but another details the scenery. A particular language about plays, playwrights and players also developed; a review loaded with codes and shorthands (particularly important given the limited space) might not be easily accessible to the modern reader but was familiar to contemporaries. In order to explicate the kinds of theatrical commentary that appeared in the 1770s, I must first outline the development of theatrical news over the century.

THEATRICAL INTELLIGENCE; OR, PUFFING THE PLAYHOUSE

As I have shown, cultural news was not found in early newspapers. Even playbills were uncommon: although there were the occasional notices about upcoming performances, regular advance advertisements did not appear until much later in the century. The launch of *The Tatler* in 1709 showed the potential for more discursive news-writing that engaged with social and cultural topics, including in the first number the first theatrical review (12 April 1709) and first eulogy for a player (Thomas Betterton) on 4 May 1709 (no.167). Though its successor *The*

[18] Barker, p. 3.
[19] Christopher Reid, 'Speaking Candidly: Rhetoric, Politics, and the Meanings of Candour in the Later Eighteenth Century', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 28 (2005), 67-82; David Francis Taylor, 'Byron, Sheridan, and the Afterlife of Eloquence', *The Review of English Studies,* 65 (2014), 474-94.

Spectator continued to address the theatre, albeit largely discussing the audience, these two papers remained outliers. Additionally there were also some special-interest periodicals; including, Steele's *The Theatre* (2 Jan-5 April 1720) and *The Anti-Theatre* (15 Feb-4 April 1720), *Cote's Weekly Journal; or, The English Stage Player* (11 May-6 July 1734), Aaron Hill and William Popple's *The Prompter, a Theatrical Paper* (1734-36), Fielding's *The Covent-Garden Journal* (1752), Bonnell Thornton's *Have At You All; or, The Drury-Lane Journal* (16 January-9 April 1752), *The Theatrical Monitor; or, Stage Management and Green Room Laid Open* (1767-1768), and the *Covent Garden Chronicle* (1768).[20] My concern lies, however, in the growth in attention to players in the general press.

Occasionally controversies involving the playhouse or players caught media attention. One such controversy was the 'Polly paper war', which raged in the newspapers in November and December 1736. The papers aired a backstage dispute between Kitty Clive, the incumbent Polly in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), and Susannah Cibber, new star of the Drury Lane stage and wife of the manager Theophilus. Felicity Nussbaum, Berta Joncus and Helen Brooks discuss the significance of this so-called 'war' in terms of player rivalries, professional rights of actresses, and the relationship between Cibber and husband.[21] I discuss it here too because it is also an important moment in the history of theatrical news and theatrical celebrity.

Though I focus on the key letters published, several papers (including the *Daily Journal, London Daily Post, London Evening Post*, and the *Grub Street Journal*) printed numerous paragraphs, letters and epigrams on the subject for many weeks. On 4 November 1736 a correspondent named 'Spectator' exposed the dispute in the *Daily Gazetteer*, which prompted a flurry of responses and commentaries in several papers. Then, on 13 November

[20] For further details see Carl Joseph Stratman, *Britain's Theatrical Periodicals, 1720-1967, a Bibliography* (New York: New York Public Library, 1972).
[21] Nussbaum, pp. 58-60; Berta Joncus, '"In Wit Superior, as in Fighting": Kitty Clive and the Conquest of a Rival Queen', *Huntington Library Quarterly,* 74 (2011), 23-42; Helen E. M. Brooks, 'Negotiating Marriage and Professional Autonomy in the Careers of Eighteenth-Century Actresses', *Eighteenth-Century Life,* 35 (2011), 39-75 (pp. 52-54).

1736, the *London Daily Post* (a paper in which Theophilus Cibber had shares) printed a pro-Cibber rebuttal; it hints that Clive had been behind the original letter to discredit her and argues that Cibber would make a superior Polly. The letter, written under the name 'A.Z.' is believed to have been written by Theophilus.

Kitty Clive responded under her own name in a letter published in the *London Daily Post* (19 November 1736) in which she disavows any links to the first letter by the 'Spectator' and condemns A.Z.'s letter as 'so scurrilous and false'. Clive's argument hinges on her professional rights; she admits that she has 'shewn [sic] an Unwillingness' to give up the role of Polly, not from 'Jealousy' or to 'Obstruct' Cibber, but because she believes it would set an unwelcome precedent. Theophilus responded, this time under his own name, in the *Grub Street Journal* (9 December 1736): he defends his wife, strenuously denies any connection with 'A.Z' and professes a particular dislike that the 'affair' had been made public. He assures the reader that he writes only to challenge the egregious correspondences that 'continue the Dispute'. Raging in several papers, the 'Polly paper war' ushered in a new kind of theatrical entertainment – one staged in the pages of the press.

Whatever Kitty Clive tried to achieve through her intervention (she claims, suspiciously, that it is to put an end to the story), it only served to fire up the story: on this occasion this worked in her favour because in January 1736 she finally appeared again as Polly. Whatever its content, the war opened up the newspapers as space to air theatre business; it must have generated much interest because it was prolonged in the news. For Berta Joncus, the Polly war showcases 'the potential for a singer-actress [Clive] to manage her own image in an environment chiefly hostile to female authorship or control', but Joncus does not consider the risk that others might use or abuse that image.[22]

My interest lies less in the particulars of the controversy, and more in that it set a

[22] Joncus, p. 24.

precedent for the newspapers to be an alternative stage to air green-room disputes. Both Kitty Clive and Susannah Cibber's personal characters came under attack during the paper war, and it opened up the press as a legitimate site for publicising actresses unlike before. The unusualness of this episode can be seen in a theatrical response; at rival venue Lincoln's Inn Fields Henry Woodward produced *The Beggar's Pantomime; or, The Contending Columbines* (1736), a satire on the controversy. What makes this satire notable is not only that it lampoons Clive and Susannah and Theophilus Cibber but also, as Joncus also observes, it 'drew heavily on the characters projected in the press reports'.[23] The lyrics to the Airs, for example, read like a patchwork from the weeks of newspaper coverage; Air VIII evokes Clive's letter, including lines such as 'never fail'd to please', 'Lose all my Parts by Degrees' and 'I will Oblige the Town', which bear striking resemblance to Clive's letter.[24] By ventriloquizing the press reports, Woodward registers the unusual role the press played in the dispute. The preface (addressed to the 'Ladies' and signed 'Harlequin') acknowledges the debt to the press: 'whatever Scandal it contains, was extracted from the several Letters publish'd in this mimick [sic] Controversy'.[25]

The Beggar's Pantomime is filled with ambivalence towards the press, but it presents Cibber and Clive as fair targets because they have engineered a paper war to attract notice; as the Prompter says: 'Why, they are not angry with each other –'tis only to make themselves more considerable'.[26] Chorus's final line does not lay all the blame for the controversy at the door of actresses, however, but points at the press for sustaining it in the first place: 'May Theatrical Contests ne'er puzzle the Great, / Or be printed in Papers like matters of State'.[27] The Chorus's plea signals the unusualness of the controversy; the paper war was an aberration from the ordinary news cycle that was treated with suspicion as much as it might have been

[23] Ibid., p. 38.
[24] Henry Woodward, *The Beggar's Pantomime; or, the Contending Colombines* (London: C. Corbett and W. Warner, 1736), p. 21. See, *London Daily Post*, 19 November 1736.
[25] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[26] Ibid., p. 21.
[27] Ibid., p. 23.

entertaining. The co-option of newspaper correspondence exposes the limitations of attempts to control public identity (through the press or otherwise): once stories are publicly known, they can be used and adapted for various means. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, dramatic appropriation of theatrical news would become increasingly complex, but we find its origins here, however crudely and simply achieved.

The Polly paper war marked a new role for the press: to make entertainment out of backstage gossip. The implications of this are much harder to determine. For example, Felicity Nussbaum's claim that '*both* actresses engaged the press' (my emphasis) is complicated not least by the fact that Susannah Cibber did not contribute under her own name in the papers.[28] I do not mean to claim inaction on Susannah's part, though like Brooks I suspect the whole controversy had much more to do with Theophilus.[29] Moreover, as *The Beggar's Pantomime* and the numerous derogatory comments about each actress in the press attest, even if one engages the press, one cannot control all the outcomes. Perhaps Nussbaum's other point, that the 'end result […] was increased receipts' for the theatre, is the only certainty about the episode.[30] Both Kitty Clive and Susannah Cibber received personal attacks for what would previously have been a backstage dispute – it was now 'news' and benefitted the press and the playhouse receipts.

Although the Polly paper war remained an anomalous theatrical press event in the first half of the century, it anticipated and made ready later press involvement with the theatre and theatrical stars. Likely in response to the interest in the Polly war the *Daily Journal* began a series called "The Occasional Prompter" in December 1736; it was short-lived, however, and finished on 25 March 1737. The controversy encapsulates the kinds of press attention that was later to dominate – the blurring of theatrical criticism with theatrical personalities. Until the

[28] Nussbaum, p. 58.
[29] Brooks, 'Negotiating Marriage', p. 53.
[30] Nussbaum, p. 59.

second half of the century, however, theatrical matters, whether salacious or serious, remained sporadic in the general news. The Polly paper war showed – if not created – the newspapers as a legitimate (albeit vexed) space for staging theatrical affairs.

Beyond straightforward theatrical criticism, the century saw the emergence of the cult of personalities in the ways the press approached the theatre. So, when in 1718 actor James Quin was involved in a brawl that resulted in the death of fellow player, William Bowen, and Quin was found guilty of manslaughter, the story was reported in several newspapers.[31] Other than noting his profession, however, the papers did not pay any more attention to Quin than they did to others embroiled in similar events. In 1718 players, though somewhat 'well-known', could not be said to be 'media stars'. Later in the century, however, even the slightest anecdote about a player's off-stage life, could be reported – even no news could be news. For example, such was the interest in actress Mary Robinson, known for her brief relationship with the Prince of Wales and called 'Perdita' in the press, the *Morning Post* (3 May 1784) even made something out of her absence: 'We hear nothing now of *Perdita*. Not a single *puff* about her at the late Masquerade.—Surely she can yet *compass the cash* to pay for the former, as well as to buy a ticket for the latter'. Actresses were not the only kinds of public figures to be gossiped about in the press, but they did receive a considerable amount of attention.

In 1757 the *Lloyd's Evening Post and British Chronicle* (1757-1804) introduced a "Theatrical Intelligence" section.[32] Though it was short-lived, by the end of the next decade similar sections featured in several newspapers. So, what caused the change? David Garrick's name is repeatedly cited as the single-most important factor, with Stuart Sherman boldly claiming that he 'conducted his theatrical life as though he were the stage's first incarnate newspaper'.[33] Garrick's biographers Stone and Kahrl (who also edited his letters), however,

[31] *Post Boy,* 19-22 April 1718; *Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post*, 26 April 1718; *Original Weekly Journal,* 26 April-3 May 1718; *Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post*, 3 May 1718; *Weekly Packet,* 5-12 July 1718.
[32] *Lloyd's Evening Post,* 30 November - 2 December 1757.
[33] Sherman, 'Garrick', p. 967; Cowan, *Social Life of Coffee*, p. 173; West, *Image of the Actor*, p. 8; Robert D.

downplay his involvement with the press.[34]

The truth probably lies somewhere in between. Though Garrick's counterpart at Covent Garden, John Rich, 'did not court the newspapers', there were precedents within the theatrical community earlier in the century.[35] As I have mentioned, Steele and Hill made early contributions to theatrical news and the Polly paper demonstrated the potential for newspapers to generate interest in both players and the playhouse. Moreover, actor-manager Theophilus Cibber held shares in the *London Daily Post*, as did actors Benjamin Griffin and John Mills.[36] Of course, we cannot know whether when they bought the shares they envisaged it as a theatrical investment, or merely a financial one. Primitive playbill-style advertisements had appeared on the front page of newspapers since the seventh number of the *Daily Advertiser* (10 February 1730/1), albeit under the inauspicious section heading 'Miscellaneous Advertisements'. Cibber's *London Daily Post* inaugurated consistent front-page playbills from the major theatrical venues. It was a selling point, as we see in the following notice, which appeared immediately below the header in the first seventy-five numbers (4 November 1734-29 January 1735):

> *The Directors of the several* THEATRES *in the* Hay-Market, Drury-Lane, Covent-Garden, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, and Goodman's-Fields *being convinced that the Advertising the several Theatrical Performances in different Papers, is attended with great Inconveniences to themselves, as well as others; particularly that the Ladies who have no Opportunity, and such Gentlemen as have no Inclination to frequent Coffee-Houses, cannot be daily informed of the several* OPERAS *or* PLAYS *to be Acted, without great Trouble and Expence: These Considerations have determined them to Advertise the* OPERAS, PLAYERS, &c. *in this Paper, in order that the Publick may be furnished at one View with all the* PLAY-BILLS [sic], *as they come from the respective* THEATRES, *free from the Mistakes*

Hume, 'Drama and Theatre in the Mid and Later Eighteenth Century', in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780,* ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 316-39 (p. 334).
[34] George Winchester Stone and George Morrow Kahrl, *David Garrick, a Critical Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979).
[35] Robert D. Hume, 'John Rich as Manager and Entrepreneur', in *The Stage's Glory: John Rich (1692-1761),* ed. by Berta Joncus and Jeremy Barlow (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 29-60 (p. 58).
[36] Harris, p. 72.

> *which usually attend the Delivering several Copies to different Presses.*[37]

This notice indicates that the newspaper editors were seeking to make financial advantage out of the public's interest in finding all the various kinds of entertainment in one place in a newspaper; indeed, a subsequent line encourages other advertisers to use the paper because so many people will read it for the theatre listings. It was beneficial for the theatres but also for the newspaper itself, both in terms of selling papers and revenue from adverts. This is distinct from the selling of 'personalities' which dominated the press later in the century, and whilst a way off from consistent theatrical content, it nevertheless demonstrates interactivity between press and playhouse prior to Garrick.

Garrick's motivation for involving the press was not only that of a manager, trying to increase his audiences, but also, on a personal level, to sell himself as the star attraction. He undoubtedly had more influence than many actresses, who would become subjects, but not necessarily producers, of newspapers. Jane Moody identifies four newspapers that Garrick held shares in (the *Public Advertiser*, *Gazetteer, Morning Post* and *St. James's Chronicle*).[38] It is tempting to interpret this as Garrick having exceptional sway, but it is not quite so simple. Nor was he singular amongst his contemporaries either; George Colman the Elder and Arthur Murphy were contributors to several papers. Garrick's involvement with the press should therefore not be considered unique, even if his handling of it was uncommon.

Garrick's correspondence certainly shows that he was familiar with a large number of printers, publishers, editors and booksellers, and reveal his roles as a reader, writer and subject of many paragraphs.[39] Doubtless there were promotional benefits to himself and the theatre,

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[37] A slightly shortened version appears after the eighth number, omitting 'particularly the […] Considerations are'.
[38] Moody, p. 72. In *Pleasures of the Imagination* John Brewer suggests four also but includes the *London Packet* instead of the *Gazetteer* (p. 416).
[39] David Garrick, *The Letters of David Garrick*, ed. by David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

but he also received bad press. In one letter, for example, he complains that the *London Chronicle* 'abus'd Me most clumsily'.[40] Having shares in a paper did not prevent false stories or accusations about him appearing in those papers either. On one occasion he complained to George Colman: 'I have been insulted greatly— first to have a Paper, in which I have a property [*St. James's Chronicle*], abuse me for puffing myself, & then I am suppos'd the Author of a paragraph, or letter in y^{e} Morn^{g} Chronicle, which the Printer himself almost avows, & which by my honor, I never heard of till you mention'd it to me'.[41] Garrick's example is important for the case studies that follow; despite a considerable amount of influence even he could not control all aspects of his press coverage.

One of Garrick's interventions established a new relationship between the press and playhouse that had important implications for the interaction between player and public. In the aftermath of the 1763 Half Price Riots, Garrick established an 'innovative, lucrative deal' with the *Public Advertiser* in which that paper paid for exclusive advance notice of Drury Lane's performances.[42] There was a clear benefit for the *Public Advertiser*: attracting readers by offering, before the inevitable republication in other newspapers, exclusive information. But, by providing the *Public Advertiser* advance information, Garrick also severed the link between the player who announced the next night's performance and the playgoers. As with the removal of the audience members from the stage, this created a distance in which celebrity could flourish: making a person at once known and distant.

From this point onwards, the newspaper became perhaps the most significant mediator between the stage and the public. Though it appeared to offer the 'Town' unprecedented information, it reduced the capacity, for example, for the claps and hisses following an epilogue to determine the repertoire. Though it liberated the theatre from the whims of the audience, it

[40] Ibid., I, p. 391.
[41] Ibid., III, pp. 1020.
[42] Sherman, 'Garrick', p. 977.

opened up the press as both mediator and police, as reviews too became commonplace: the relationship between the press, playhouse and the players were changed.

I do not believe that readers were repeatedly taken in by the exaggerated claims of the papers; instead, newspapers became part of the cultural experience, helping to shape reception of plays and players in addition to being a form of entertainment in themselves. In 1807, German traveller to London, Christian August Gottlieb Goede, published *The Stranger in England*, which includes a lengthy discussion on the political content of newspapers. He writes that 'The public does not expect impartiality from an editor, but requires that he should be uncorrupted' and that it is 'necessary to read the papers of both parties, to form a just conception of the debates'.[43]

Theatrical coverage was similarly drawn from biased sources, but it was well known and even joked about in the press. For example, 'Sylvia', in the *London Courant* (19 November 1781) complains that the Bath papers are 'all in the interest of managers', praises the 'impartial' *London Courant* and suggests readers should 'laugh' at the 'nonsense' puffs. I suggest that this is central to our understanding of reading practices; newspapers were a form of print entertainment and 'truth' had little to do with it. Rather than read many papers to 'form a just conception' of theatrical news, I suggest that many enjoyed the discordance between content. These were neither naive nor ignorant readers, but rather highly aware of the spurious content, and enjoying it.

The increase in playhouse news, broadly conceived, altered the theatrical experience; 'by mid-century' argues Sherman 'you would not attend a performance without being mindful of the printed buzz that brought you there and of the press coverage that might ensue'.[44] What kind of material might a reader have encountered? As well as playbills and notices about

[43] Christian August G. Goede, *The Stranger in England; or, Travels in Great Britain*, 3 vols (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1807), I, pp. 222-23; and 27. Vol. 1.
[44] Sherman, 'Garrick', p. 970.

upcoming performances, there were also puff paragraphs, reviews, prologues and epilogues printed, poetry, and letters. Crammed into small spaces, the dense lines contain numerous shorthands and coded language that at times appear to be impenetrable but would have been legible to those familiar with the stage. So too, there may well be some room for play; those in the know could take pleasure in their recognition of allusions and references.

An example is Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, which premiered on 8 May 1777 at the Drury-Lane Theatre, near the end of Sheridan's first season as Manager there. According to Lucyle Werkmeister, Sheridan would become 'manager of the press for the Rockingham Whigs' following his election to parliament in 1779 – a testament to his skilful manoeuvring with the press, which he might well have practiced as manager and dramatist.[45] Newspapers began to hint at a new Sheridan comedy, mistakenly naming it *School for Slander*, in March 1777.[46] More secure speculations followed, with announcements about casting and performance date the following month – the latter pushed back several times, according to the *Gazetteer* (28 April 1777) 'on account of the Arrangement of the Benefits'. The delay increased the time for speculation, and also for a revival of Sheridan's earlier success, *The Rivals*. James E. Evans notes the parallels made in the press with Congreve's *Love for Love*, which newspaper records show also happened to be revived in the weeks prior to *The School for Scandal*.[47] Reviews of the first performance were positive and it was staged twenty times during its first season, which closed only one month later on 7 June. The printed 'buzz' that anticipated the first performance, though considerable, was nothing to the buzz created for the rest of the season; as well as reviews, several papers printed letters on the merits (or flaws) of the piece, and it was also announced that Sheridan would not be publishing it, thereby predicting continued clamour to see it the next season, and no doubt encouraging viewers for the final

[45] Werkmeister, pp. 10-11.
[46] *Morning Chronicle*, 20 March 1777; *Morning Post*, 31 March 1777.
[47] James E. Evans, 'Evelina, the Rustic Girls of Congreve and Abington, and Surrogation in the 1770s', *The Eighteenth Century,* 52 (2011), 157-71 (p. 167).

performances of that one.[48] This is just one example, but it demonstrates the potential for the newspapers to encourage audiences and shape their reception.

Prologues and epilogues had long represented the audience as the ultimate arbiters of taste: after all, the success of a play rested on whether an audience 'clapped' or 'hissed'. Newspapers developed the theme of the public as judges; critics frequently fawned over the audience as 'brilliants', 'splendid' and 'candid', or other similar encomiums. Full houses were often predicted or reported in order to heighten popularity. Notable attendees, particularly Royalty or members of the audience, were also singled out – or anticipated – in order to raise the profile of a performance. Signalling public support was also crucial; paragraphs drummed up support by suggesting tickets were selling fast. This is crucial; the prologues and epilogues were designed to shape the reception of plays, and, as outlined above, from mid-century the newspapers played a part in shaping responses in advance of attending. The newspapers became an alternative space in which the 'job' of the prologue or epilogue could be done.

It is not always clear who was doing the shaping and influencing. Insistence on contemporary parallels with eighteenth-century media culture can often be unhelpful, but there are similarities with anonymous and pseudonymous contemporary social media users and the anonymous and pseudonymous correspondents in eighteenth-century newspaper correspondents. In her study on Byron's 'fans' and their use of commonplace books (in which they inserted poetry about or by Byron), Corin Throsby argues that they 'operate very much like' social networking sites in the twenty-first century: 'the user constructs a portrait of themselves which is available to all other members of their network'.[49] A better analogy (or rather, antecedent) for social networking sites in the eighteenth-century is the periodical press, to which there were multiple contributors, often anonymous or pseudonymous. Though

[48] *Morning Chronicle*, 17 May 1777.
[49] Corin Throsby, 'Byron, Commonplacing and Early Fan Culture', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850,* ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 227-44 (p. 233).

newspapers often invited correspondence – and engaged in public dialogues with some of them – we cannot trace which theatrical news was written by the papers' staff, the public, theatrical management or the players (or their friends). The dynamics of truth and identity were complicated – and remain so.

Though many contributors were likely to be theatre insiders, the public nevertheless played a considerable role in celebrity-making, not only as consumers, but also as producers through their newspaper contributions. Correspondence was the life-blood of the press; whether they were genuine or fabricated, letters to the papers constitute a considerable part of the cultural conversations that took place in the press. Papers could, through this means, publish contradictory or even inflammatory opinions without attack. They contributed to support or attack a particular player, and they were often used as part of press politics. For example, in the *Morning Post* (14 October 1775) 'G.B.', a 'constant reader', declares:

> As I am no *critic* at present, but wish to qualify myself for one, I am a constant reader of all the theatrical intelligence, that is to be found in the public papers. This Sir, sometimes embarrasses me; as I find the same performers praised in one paper, and abused in another. I subscribe to the judgment and candour of your *critic*, but that of another paper seems to dictate to the whole town; and in an imperious absolute style, tells the public who they are to approve or disapprove; and often arraigns the applause the audience give, when pleased with the exhibition they are present at; telling them they are a pack of fools, for presuming to judge for themselves, or for an opinion till he has marked one out for them.

G.B.'s comments here appear to be an attack not only generally on the conflicting accounts of players from paper to paper, but likely a specific attack on Woodfall in the *Morning Chronicle* (the *Morning Post*'s rival). G.B. continues by proffering his opinion on various players, before declaring 'I am inclined to think some of these critics are paid for their puffs; so that an actor who will not drink porter with the hirelings, and pay for it, will always be backwards in their list of favourites. Do not the actors sometimes praise themselves and abuse others?' The joke

here is that the culture of paying for paragraphs was well known and therefore the credit of the correspondent likely to be low (though presumably people enjoyed reading them).

Not all theatre 'fans' were pleased by the kinds of coverage newspapers offered, or at least criticism of this coverage was a common feature in other forms of print; the anonymous author of the *Theatrical Examiner* (1757), a pamphlet that critiques the playhouses and the players, refers to the 'excrement of the press'.[50] So too the first number of the *Theatrical Monitor* (17 October 1767) accuses various newspapers to be 'partial and servile'; true, though some paragraphs were published under real names most were anonymous or published under a pseudonym, so it very hard to trace the source. And from the 1770s all kinds of paragraphs could be inserted for a fee: in short, 'fake news' was commonplace.[51] Nevertheless, the *Theatrical Monitor*'s claim to be 'wholly uninfluenced', should be viewed with caution.

Accusations of corruption are unsurprising given that many news-writers, editors and proprietors were often conspicuously linked to the playhouse. Those heavily involved in news-making included Richard Steele, Aaron Hill, Henry Fielding, David Garrick, Arthur Murphy, George Colman the Elder, Hugh Kelly, Frances Brooke, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Edward Topham. I do not mean to overstate their control.

Widespread, blatant puffing did not go unchallenged, but such challenges may not always have served high purposes. For example, the *Gazetteer* (17 March 1783) complained: 'A friend of *Sir Fretful Plagiary's* has got himself inducted as a critic to a certain morning paper, in which he plentifully bespatters every *favourite* piece with abuse, and every *author* whose labours the vulgar and ignorant shew an avidity to be gratified'. This challenge to puffing in the name of criticism is not really an attack on puffing at all, but rather a counter puff against sentimental comedy writer Richard Cumberland, caricatured by Sheridan as Sir

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[50] *The Theatrical Examiner: An Enquiry into the Merits and Demerits of the Present English Performers in General; the Substance of Theatric Character; Public Taste; Conduct of the Managers* (London: J. Doughty, 1757), p. 9.
[51] Werkmeister, p. 7.

Fretful Plagiary in *The Critic.* The reference to a 'certain morning paper' was another common means of identifying rival presses; its vagueness almost certainly implies readers who know which paper – or find out.

As demonstrated, the eighteenth-century mediascape changed dramatically over the century; the growth of the cult of personality, coupled with the growing influence of managers (especially Garrick), rendered the newspapers a key component in the formation of actresses' public image. Celebrity studies' concentration on other literary forms (such as the memoir, or visual media, such as portraiture or graphic satire) can miss the wider cultural conversation by ignoring the constant burr about particular actresses in the press. It is to the specific language of actresses in the news that I now turn.

PEN PORTRAITS: WRITING 'CELEBRATED' ACTRESSES

In the new gossip-centred press, actresses became notable (though by no means singular) subjects – or targets. I do not claim that any of this was 'new' per se; instead, as Uriel Heyd suggests, they were 'amplifications of continuous trends'.[52] For example, Nussbaum opens *Rival Queens* with reference to a 1765 broadsheet, *A Critical Balance of the Performers at Drury-Lane Theatre*, which ranks the actors and actresses in the Company, and provides some grading scales for the 1757-58 season that appeared in *The Theatrical Review*.[53] Occasionally these kinds of scales were printed in the newspapers too; not in a special interest publication but in a general newspaper alongside current affairs, stocks and shares figures and an assortment of gossip.[54] This too is important; 'news' about actresses permeates newspapers in

[52] Heyd, p. 62.
[53] Nussbaum, pp. 1-6. An advert for 'A Critical Balance' appeared in *Public Advertiser* (30 May 1765).
[54] 'A SCALE of the Merit of the Performers on the Irish Stage, 1763' (*London Chronicle*, 2-4 February 1764) '*A* SCALE of THEATRICAL MERIT' (*Morning Chronicle,*17 February 1776).

the final decades of the century – and frequently in discussions quite distinct from theatrical criticism. A snapshot of the kinds of writing that appeared about actresses can only hint at the extent of their presence in the newspapers: from the 1770s onwards theatrical business appeared in the newspapers every day. Paragraphs were also much copied (unattributed) from other papers so the same content was circulated and re-circulated.

At first glance, the repeated tropes used to describe actresses might seem inimical to producing a unique 'brand'; new players were 'acquisitions', popular ones were 'celebrated', and their performances puffed as 'inimitable', 'perfect' or the 'best'. Sometimes the exceptional nature of individual performers was signified by the use of the definite article ('the Abington', 'the Siddons', 'the Jordan'). A difficult role was often an 'arduous task'. Yet we might also view such repetition as aligning actresses with certain 'types' and strengthening the public's recognition of their 'lines of business'. As we have seen, the numbers reading the newspapers outnumbered those attending the theatre and, without the photographic evidence of modern-day reporting, the language needs to be accessible in order to be legible: standard, repeated encomiums are one means of achieving that.

Performance reviews were only one kind of news content. Speculation on casting, summer engagements and personal lives were common. Speculation, of course, gave a veneer of the paper being 'in the know', though of course information inserted was often paid for. For example, Dora Jordan's absence from the stage was explained thus in September 1789; 'Mrs. Jordan does not return to Drury-lane Theatre till the end of November, by which period it is supposed that all her *labour* in the country will be *over*.'[55] On the surface this is presented as kind of theatrical news – about a leading actress not appearing – but for the unmarried *Mrs.* Jordan, her rumoured pregnancy was the real story.

Poetry on all kinds of topics, many in response to current affairs, was another common

[55] *Morning Post*, 21 September 1789.

feature of the periodical press. Concomitant with the rise of the 'cult of personalities', notable public figures were often the subjects or dedicatees. Poems related to actresses appeared frequently. A small sample here is enough to indicate the range. In the *St. James's Chronicle* (3-5 December 1765) 'A.M' contributed a witty ballad in response to seeing Abington for the first time play the Widow Bellmour in Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him* to the tune of '*I've been to Abingdon*'. By contrast 'J.L' published the mawkish '*LINES*. Addressed to Mrs. Pope, By an Admirer of her PRIVATE CHARACTER, *And* PUBLIC ABILITIES' in the *Public Advertiser* (11 November 1790), which puffs her acting and personal behaviour.

Many are simply entertaining, such as this contribution by 'Mary the Cook-Maid' in the *Public Advertiser* (1 May 1769):

> *On my* favourite Actress *quitting the Stage.*
>
> BUSY Clive,–in Drury's Hive
> You've help'd to make the Honey,–
> On Star-light Night, not Noon-tide Sun,
> Brought home the yellow Money.
>
> Now hear the Wish of one like you,
> That's fat, and old, and funny;
> May you ne'er know an Ach or Woe
> Till Time himself grows dunny.

These lines mark Clive's recent retirement; the first stanza appears to applaud her, whilst the second somewhat undermines the panegyric. The writer reveals familiarity with Clive's work; the Cook-Maid suggests she is 'like' Clive – and those kinds of servant parts had been part of Clive's repertoire, such as Termagant and Muslin in Arthur Murphy's *The Upholsterer* (1758) and *The Way to Keep Him* (1760). This is just a small sample; poetry about actresses, and other notable figures, featured regularly in papers.

Familiarity is key here; both in the common lexicon used and in the writers' and readers' knowledge of the actresses. The generic conventions used by newspapers allowed readers to

'read' the codes clearly and imagine a performance they may not have seen. There are parallels we might draw here with the prevailing tragic acting style, which involved performing the passions as transitions between set poses (or attitudes). Audience members were familiar with the codes in each position and movement.[56] So too, the tendency for players to undertake similar kinds of roles (in part due to the repertory system in which there was limited rehearsal time) meant that players were expected to play the same kinds of roles.[57] Sometimes the crossover could be extreme: Termagant and Muslin, for example, share almost verbatim the same lines in their closing scenes. This system contributed to the development of players' celebrity as they became associated with a 'type' and the language that described that type became a kind of 'brand'.

But the common language did not mean the writing lost all its specificity; as the 'Cook-maid' poem attests, public profiles used shared language to present a unique player. The ubiquitous phrases did not undermine claims to fame either, but rather supported it; to be described as 'celebrated' or 'inimitable' serve to connect an actress to her predecessors. For example, in anticipation of Abington's forthcoming cross-dressed appearance as Scrub in Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*, a 'Theatrical Observation' featured in the *Public Advertiser* (1 February 1786) that recalled the travesty appearances of contemporary Sarah Siddons, and her predecessors Kitty Clive and Peg Woffington, even though the latter had died twenty-six years previously. We see here how newspapers could function as a kind of cultural memory bank, creating links across generations. Before turning to the case studies to investigate how individual public identities could emerge from a generic news style, first I will outline novelistic impressions of a new relationship between actress, newspapers and public identity.

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[56] For a detailed analysis of acting styles see Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press 1985).
[57] Ibid., p. 153; Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 15; Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 28.

NOVEL FORMS

By the 1770s, the language of theatrical criticism and theatrical gossip in the papers framed both fictional and real experiences of drama and began to be used by novelists in their fictions. Recent work by Ros Ballaster and Gillian Russell has drawn attention to the multifaceted interactivity between drama and novels.[58] Many novels include cameo appearances of real actors and actresses. These scenes produce what Gillian Russell calls the 'reality effect', locating the novels in the time period.[59] For example, Henry Fielding and Frances Burney depict Garrick on stage in *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Evelina* (1778), Tobias Smollett introduces James Quin (off-stage) in *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), Thomas Holcroft features Sarah Siddons and Dora Jordan in *Hugh Trevor* (1793-96), and Macklin as Shylock appears in Maria Edgeworth's novel about anti-Semitism, *Harrington* (1814).[60] As well as grounding novels in particular historical moments, the fictionalisation of players in novels can also be seen as an extension of the public understanding of stage stars as 'public' figures.

Work by James E. Evans, Jocelyn Harris and Gillian Skinner explores the integration of real-life actresses into plots or as models for characters.[61] Novelising players demonstrates that

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[58] Ros Ballaster, 'Rivals for the Repertory: Theatre and Novel in Georgian Literature', *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research*, 27.1 (Summer 2012), 5-24; Gillian Russell, 'The Novel and the Stage', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Volume 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820,* ed. by Karen O'Brien and Peter Garside (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The work of Frances Burney and Jane Austen is particularly noted for its theatricality, see Marcie Frank, 'Frances Burney's Theatricality', *ELH,* 82.2 (2015), 615-35; Francesca Saggini, *Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Paula Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002); Penny Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[59] Russell, 'The Novel and the Stage', p. 512, 522.

[60] Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling*, ed. by Fredson Bowers and Martin C. Battestin*,* in *The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), II, pp. 853-57; Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1994), I, pp. 27-28; Tobias Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker*, ed. by Shaun Regan, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 2008), I, pp. 59-63; Thomas Holcroft, *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor*, ed. by Seamus Deane (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.105-07, 142-44; Maria Edgeworth, *Harrington*, ed. by Susan Manly (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2004), pp. 114- 17.

[61] Evans; Jocelyn Margaret Harris, 'Jane Austen and Celebrity Culture: Shakespeare, Dorothy Jordan and Elizabeth Bennet', *Shakespeare,* 6.4 (December 2010), 410-30; Gillian Skinner, '"An Unsullied Reputation in the Midst of Danger": Barsanti, Propriety and Performance in Burney's Early Journals and Letters', *Women's Writing,* 19.4 (January 2012), 525-543.

players' identities were used a bit like puppets: they were subject to discussion and re-creation, either to ventriloquize or revise presumptions about players' 'known' characters.

Newspaper language is used by novelists of the period as a framework to depict the theatre. Depictions of fictional players often draw upon the kinds of language found in the press and some of the novels even engage directly with the press's role in actresses' success. James E. Evans's research points out an interesting feature of Frances Burney's theatre scenes in *Evelina* (1778): Burney's use of contemporary newspaper commentary.[62] Evans shows that when Evelina watches Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695), Burney's characters become mouthpieces for ideas that Evans has traced back to various newspaper responses to Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700).[63] Evans's work tracing links between newspapers and Burney's novels has informed my approach here. Ventriloquizing newspaper content like this reflects the influence the press had in forming the language to describe both performances and the players themselves. Whilst Burney's characters parrot the papers silently, other writers more directly parodied the press or openly discussed it.

Frances Brooke, former editor of periodical *The Old Maid*, which she wrote under the pseudonym 'Mary Singleton', and dramatist, was familiar with the press and its relationship to theatre and society and large.[64] She engages with the press directly in her novel, *The Excursion* (1778), which follows heroine Maria Villiers ill-advised journey to London.[65] She lodges in the house of Mrs. Merrick, but her friend and desired guide, Mrs. Herbert, is away, so she is left without a guide to London society. A dreamer, Maria believes she will become a successful

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[62] Evans, p. 160.
[63] Ibid.
[64] See Kathryn R. King, 'Frances Brooke, Editor, and the Making of the *Old Maid* (1755-1756)', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s,* ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 342-57; Manushag N. Powell, 'Theatrical, Periodial, Authorial: Frances Brooke's *Old Maid* (1755-1756)', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s,* ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 426-39.
[65] Frances Brooke, *The Excursion*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider and Hope D. Cotton, 2 vols (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997). Further references will be made in-text.

writer and marry Lord Melville to have a coach and coronet. Within the overarching courtship plot, which eventually sees Maria agree to marry Mr. Hammond, Mrs. Merrick's ex-lodger who tries to help Maria, the theatre and the press play central roles in Maria's development. Garrick comes in for extensive criticism, through the presentation of a selfish and unkind (unnamed) theatre manager, owing to his rejection of Brooke's early work, which hindered her dramatist aims.[66]

Maria's ideas about being a writer and the theatre appear to be drawn largely from newspapers. She decides, for example, 'to give the profits of her play to a public charity' because she believes doing so would 'secure its reputation' (I, p.52). She believes this because she had 'read […] a very warm and elaborate encomium in that impartial vehicle of truth and candour, the Morning-Post', presumably on Garrick (I, p.52). The joke is twofold; first, the *Morning Post*, as mentioned above, was renowned for its dubious veracity and edited by Garrick's friend, Bate, and second it draws attention to the publicity underpinning charitable work, thereby undermining the sense of generosity.[67] Maria's inability to 'read' the newspapers properly is a sign of her ignorance and anticipates her subsequent difficulties in navigating London's social world properly.

Like so many heroines during their first London season, Maria attends the theatre, and like so many other heroines, Maria's virtue is signalled by her concentration on the performance, unlike other fashionable ladies in attendance. Maria wants to see a new tragedy, Robert Jephson's *Braganza* (1775), first staged at Drury Lane, after protracted negotiations with Garrick, on 17 February 1775, but is told she cannot get a ticket until the 'thirtieth night' (I, p.53). Lady Hardy tells her 'the house being engaged for thirty nights is a jest, as there are not so many nights during the season on which it is possible this tragedy can be played'. The

[66] Powell, 'Theatrical, Periodial, Authorial: Frances Brooke's *Old Maid* (1755-1756)', pp. 426-27.
[67] See Danielle Spratt, '"Genius Thus Munificently Employed!!!": Philanthropy and Celebrity in the Theatres of Garrick and Siddons.', *Eighteenth-Century Life,* 37 (Fall 2013), 55-84.

play was an enormous success; it played for fifteen nights during its first season, which, though not thirty, was a considerable number. Maria's ignorance serves to expose the highly coded experience of theatregoing; puffed up claims of sold out venues served to spark interest and sell more tickets. Lady Hardy bitterly claims that 'rank and consequence' cannot secure a box: 'I have known a countess refused a box, which has been given to the wife of her linendraper [sic]' (I, p.53). Brooke here again attacks Garrick: the implication being that being a friend of his helps to get a seat – and also fills the house.

In the end Maria attends the first night, but nevertheless 'she heard much of the tragedy which was to be performed; she had heard still more of the admirable actress who was to play the principal character' (I, p.56). Maria's expectations likely refer to the extensive puffs that had anticipated its first performance. The actress playing the 'bright Louisa' (a description itself taken from the play's epilogue) was Mary Ann Yates, Brooke's friend and co-manager of the King's Theatre between 1773-1778.[68] Though the description of Maria's experience is drawn from the kind of language found in the papers, for example, though 'the tragedy and the actress excited her admiration' Maria remains a little unimpressed until the final scene – a critique echoed in several newspapers.[69]

Close attention to the actual initial reviews suggests ways that Brooke both drew upon and resisted contemporary criticism. The *Morning Chronicle* (18 February 1775) commended her and co-star Mr. Smith for giving 'highest justice to their parts', and the *St. James's Chronicle* (16-18 February 1775) praised their 'excellent Action' and her 'happy Manner of speaking'. By contrast the *Morning Post* (21 February 1775) praised only that she 'had well conceived the character', before adding significant criticism:

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[68] Brooke wrote "The Authentick Memoirs of Mary Ann Yates", following Yates's death, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 57 (July 1787), pp. 585-589. The epilogue was printed in several papers: *Lloyd's Evening Post* (22-24 Feb 1775); *Craftsman or Say's Weekly Journal* (25 February 1775); *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (22 February 1775); *London Evening Post* (21-23 February 1775); *London Chronicle or Universal Evening Post* (21-23 February 1775); *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (18-21 February 1775).
[69] *Morning Chronicle*, 20 February 1775; *London Chronicle*, 16-18 February 1775.

> [Yates] destroys it's [sic] stage effect, by the most conceited turn of her periods: 'tis a vocal affection that grows upon her hourly, and threatens before the expiration of her present articles to work her theatrical overthrow.[70]

There is a hint here at the vexed relationship between Garrick and Yates – he found his leading ladies difficult to work with. The newspaper report goes on to praise Yates's dress (provided by management) but complains about her choice of hairstyle: 'her head resembles that of a light-dragoon array'd with red horse-hair plumes'. A correspondent, 'An Impartial Auditor' to the *Morning Chronicle* (20 February 1775) does not mention her at all. Several, however, praise the 'managers' for the stage scenery and costumes – praise somewhat undermined when we remember Garrick's influence in the press.[71]

Maria, however, is charmed by the 'bright Louisa': 'The beauty of her form, the easy majesty of her deportment, secured Maria's partiality before she spoke' (I, p.56). Though not drawn verbatim, this evokes the kind of criticism found in newspapers; Brooke using the opportunity perhaps to redress the muted impression given in the initial reviews. One of Maria's final impressions might echo an actual review: 'the beautiful, the expressive, the picturesque, change of her countenance, on finding herself in safety with her Juan, calls for the vivid pencil of Raphael himself' is reminiscent of a review in the *Morning Post* (20 February 1775) by 'Impartialist': 'Mrs. Yates, in particular (to borrow a phrase from the painters) gave high colouring to the finished character of the heroine Louisa; her excellence transcends praise, and her correctness defies criticism'. Overall, we see that the press shaped Maria's expectations and the lexicon for describing her experience is taken from the kinds of language found in the press. Brooke re-centres Yates in Maria's reception of the piece; both women had vexed

[70] This review was reprinted in the *Middlesex Journal*, 18-21 February 1775.
[71] *Morning Chronicle*,18 February 1775; *General Evening Post*, 16-18 February 1775; *Gazetteer*, 20 February 1775; *Morning Post*, 20 February 1775; *Morning Post*, 21 February 1775; *Middlesex Journal*, 18-21 February 1775.

relationships with theatrical management, intensified by their decision to take over the King's Opera; Garrick and Covent-Garden manager George Colman's influence in the press led to negative reports about Yates.[72]

These scenes engage with the press's role in mediating theatrical experience. Later in the novel, Brooke engages with scandal culture as perpetuated by the press. Though not about actresses in particular, it evinces the public's obsession with private characters being exposed in the press. Without proper guidance, Maria's behaviour is open to criticism and 'pretty good scribblier' Lady Blast takes advantage. Lady Blast writes an 'admirable *tete-a-tete* [sic] history of Lord M-lv-le and Miss V-ll–rs' (II, p.116) to be inserted in a magazine. Brooke here alludes to the *Town and Country Magazine*, which published monthly scandal histories of love affairs. The practice, drawn from *roman-à-clef* novels, of not printing name in full was used in several periodicals; the obviousness of the target adds to the silliness – Brooke's inclusion of it here locates her satire on contemporary culture, and shows both her and her readers' familiarity with print forms.

Though Brooke is clearly critical of this kind of scandal writing, she directs her attack not at the makers, but at the readers. Lady Blast's manuscript is received by 'the compositor to a scandalous magazine' who has 'so much feeling as to detest his present employment' and only does it for his wife and seven children. Because he visits Mrs. Merrick and has seen Maria frequently he spares her from the attack (II, p.117). Brooke's sympathetic portrayal of the hack writer contrasts with an extensive discussion on the 'licentious malignity of that press, the liberty of which is at once the glory and the strength of our constitution', Brooke makes clear readers' responsibility: 'cease to read, and the evil dies of itself: cease to purchase, and the venal calumniator will drop his useless pen' (II, p.117-9). In short, it is the reading public who

[72] Peter Thompson, 'Yates [née Graham], Mary Ann (1728-1787)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online], <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30196>.

prop up the 'malignity of [the] press'.

Though actresses feature in these novels, neither Burney nor Brooke address the press's role in the creation of actresses' identities, but rather use them to develop their heroine's character. Former actress Mary Robinson, however, tackled the negative reputation of actresses in her 1799 novel *The Natural Daughter*.[73] Robinson had been subject to much press attention, particularly in the late 1770s and early 1780s, but was later a poetry contributor to the *World*, *Oracle* and *Morning Post* in the 1790s.[74] The story is set in 1792 when we follow heroine Martha as she visits Bath, marries Mr. Morley, cares for an abandoned child, come under suspicion for being the child's mother, separates from her husband, becomes an actress (under the name Mrs. Denison) to earn money, and is subject to the capriciousness of success and social ostracism for doing so, before she goes to France and remarries Lord Francis.

Robinson registers the role of the newspaper in cultural life several times. Reading habits are used to signal character; Martha's news reading distinguishes her from her supercilious sister, Julia, who 'never read diurnal prints, because the accounts of casualties were too distressing for her excessive sensibility' (I, p.110). News reading is not treated without equivocation, however; the 'secondary mania' of the fashion-conscious Leadenheads 'was that of seeing their consequence recorded in the periodical publications of the time' (I, p.180).

Newspapers are more than an index to character, however: Robinson also interweaves newspapers as part of cultural life. Her own poetry, which was first published in the *Morning Post*, appears throughout as Martha's writing; at one point lady Eldercourt asks 'Are you Anna Matilda, or Della Crusca, or Laura Maria?' (p.235). These were the names used by Della Cruscan poets Hannah Cowley, Robert Merry and Robinson herself. Martha denies it, before going on to read "Ode to the Blue-Bell", which Robinson also published in the *Morning Post*

[73] Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England and the Natural Daughter*, ed. by Sharon M. Setzer, 2 vols (Peterborough, Ont. and Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2003). Further references will be made in-text.
[74] For an extensive treatment of Robinson's engagement with the press see Brock, pp. 77-108. See also Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).

(5 April 1799) (II, p. 235-6). Eldercourt dislikes her 'impertinent opinions', but a 'young nobleman' believes 'the lines are truly poetical' (II, p.236-7). Later, Martha's submissions (Robinson's own) are apparently rejected by newspapers; 'she found that her thoughts were too refined, her subjects too delicate for the vitiated taste of the present day' (II, p. 214). Sharon M. Setzer suggests this was 'ironic certainly' to contemporary readers familiar with Robinson's newspaper poetry (II, p. 214n1).

That Martha's biography shares features with her author is clear (she works as an actress and has an unsatisfactory husband). Setzer also suggests that a description of Martha ('From her window she observed the passing throngs') 'closely resembles' descriptions of Robinson printed in the *Morning Post* in June 1777 (II, p. 218n1). Whether Robinson inserted those passages into the newspaper in the first place, she drew upon the newspapers specifically, or her writing style was a news-writing style, it is clear that the newspapers were directly involved in Robinson's creative process.

There is also similitude between the language used to describe Martha's debut as Lady Teazle and the kinds of language that appears in the press: 'the task was an arduous one: but the high spirit which upheld her under the pressure of unmerited persecutions did not, in this moment of trial, lose any part of its sustaining quality' (I, p. 178) and 'She was lively and unaffected: her smiles were exhilarating; her sighs were pathetic; her voice was either delicately animating or persuasively soothing: she neither giggled convulsively nor wept methodically: she was the thing she seemed, while even the perfection of her art was Nature' (I, p.179). Once again, the conceptual framework for describing and experiencing theatrical performance appears to be drawn from the criticism that appeared in the press.

Robinson also uses the familiar descriptions of real actresses to conjure the actress type of the 'lively and engaging' Martha, who has the 'easy elegance' of Farren and 'genuine playful graces' of Jordan, whilst her friend, tragedienne Mrs. Sedgely, is a 'juvenile Siddons' (I, p.

180). These depictions presuppose familiarity with these actresses, and in particular, the language used to describe them in the press. In doing so Robinson is critical of the role of the press in shaping public identity: she presents it as divorced from real events and predicated on the kinds of depictions that will serve hungry public taste only. Thus, the novelisation of actresses, whether real or fictional, draws upon the conventions for describing actresses found in newspapers. In short, actresses became kinds of fictional character and their 'fictive lives' played out in the press could then in turn be novelised further.

In *The Actress of the Present Day* (1817) heroine Mary Irwin turns to the stage following the death of her father. She shunned by her sister, Hester, for the impropriety of her career.[75] It is Hester, however, who has an illegitimate child and dies following childbirth. The virtuous Mary raises the child, but this serves only to add to the (false) rumours of her own sexual impropriety. There are parallels here with Robinson's plot, but also, as Kathleen Anderson argues, with Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814), as both exploit the gap between reality and public perception, and ultimately present the 'actress' – both social and professional – as 'virtuous'.[76] Here, it is worth noting the role of the press in shaping Mary's career and the author's careful aping of the tone of a review. Mary is disappointed by the review of her debut performance, which reads as follows:

> Last night the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet was performed at our theatre, for the purpose of bringing forward a young lady in her first attempt. Such an attempt we never before beheld; her modesty, we are conscious, caused it thus to be inserted in the bills, but her performance throughout evinced intellectual conception of the highest order; her voice melodious, clear and full; her person approaching to the majestic, and of the most exquisite symmetry; and her countenance irresistibly attractive and pre-eminently beautiful, and through varied succeeding emotions, the perfect index of the brightest intelligence! her action peculiarly just, appropriate, and graceful; she looked, she walked, she moved, a being of superior endowment! the whole personification was a chef

[75] *The Actress of the Present Day*, 3 vols (London: James Harper, 1817). Further references made in-text.
[76] Anderson, pp. 435-6.

> d'oeuvre of transcendent abilities. This very young lady is, we hear, an orphan daughter of a celebrated field-officer, and was more to higher expectations; so family misfortunes alone, have afforded us this exquisite, intellectual treat.
>
> (I, pp.166-67)

The exaggerated praise troubles Mary, but for contemporary readers this language captures the tone and style employed by many theatre critics to 'puff' actresses, especially newcomers. Although the novelist appears to exaggerate for satirical purposes the newspapers' insincere encomiums here, I will present similar kinds of language in reviews of actual actresses in this and subsequent chapters. It was typical, for example, to pay close attention to the way an actress looked, walked and moved, but only offer vague statements about the interpretation of the part. That is, the review tells us the performance 'evinced intellectual conception of the highest order' and that it was an 'exquisite, intellectual treat' but it does not actually describe in what way it was 'intellectual'. Although acting moved towards a more 'natural' style by the turn of the century, for the most part it still consisted of set moves and gestures (called 'points') and positions known as 'attitudes': in short, parts were not interpreted – they were fulfilled. The lack of specificity in the reviews reflects an acting style that privileged key features of a performer rather than interpretation. We should be careful therefore not to assume that the attention paid to actresses' physicality indicates only a disparaging or objectifying attitude towards young female performers.

Mary, in desperate financial circumstances, embarks upon a theatrical career quite ignorant of its practices. Nevertheless, it is worth considering Mary's complaints about the review, which she puts forward in a letter to her friend, Mrs. Forrester:

> Is not this rather an oblique satire, than a just compliment? I humbly apprehend it is. If I even possessed those capabilities at present, what could they say more of me, after years of hard study and tried experience. In my poor opinion, it will prove more detrimental than beneficial to my future exertions: it is beyond ridiculous, though, clearly, the puff direct, it is really hurtful; it leaves no room for farther encomium but must create a difference of opinion, and

> subject me to envious or malignant animadversion. Would it never had been inserted!
>
> (I, pp.167-68)

Mary raises an important point: why create an image of the actress that cannot possibly be sustained? Moreover, how could any reader take such puffs seriously when they know that they will likely apply to another actress the following week? This point is underlined by the same newspaper's response to the appearance of leading London tragedienne, Miss Starrit, in which 'the very same string of compliments, and, if possible, in more turgid expressions, were applied now to *her*, as, a little time since, were applied to Mary' (I, p.241). As a common feature, we might expect readers and audience members to distrust the encomiums presented but this would appear not to be the case: both the newspapers and theatres thrived on their interrelation with crowds drawn to the theatre and newspaper sales increasing during times of increased media coverage. Readers were not being duped by such criticisms because it was an accepted part of the wider theatrical conversation.

Though not all critics produced these kinds of reviews, they were familiar enough in the pages of both national and local press by the turn of the century to be satirised. To counterbalance the saccharine criticisms, newspapers also spread negative stories that threatened reputations. Mary, carer for her dead sister's illegitimate child, is thought to be the child's mother, the reports of which spread throughout the town. Only her friend Captain Mildmay declares the rumours calumnies, asserting that: 'it was all a *d—d falsehood*, the newspapers all *lied*; they had killed *him* in four separate engagements, and that this letter might be *forged,* as easy as a *seaman's* will' (III, p.239).

When the truth is discovered, the newspapers are quick to re-affirm her virtue (forgetting their role in proclaiming her vice): 'her *conduct*, which has so ungenerously suffered from injurious misrepresentation and too hasty conclusions, is now cleared in the fullest manner by the most incontrovertible proofs, to the entire satisfaction of the proprietors, and to

all friends to injured innocence' (III, p.297). Nonetheless, this apology does not ameliorate the newspaper's role as conduit by which some of these stories spread. Throughout *The Actress of the Present Day*, the newspaper features at pivotal moments, illustrating the role the print media plays in making and breaking theatrical success. The inclusion of the newspaper in the narrative firmly locates the fictional world of the novel in the 'Present Day' of the early nineteenth century.

Often the story of early actresses is bookended by those who entered the stage following the Restoration and the exit of Sarah Siddons in the 1810s. And yet the theatrical worlds at the start and end of this period have fundamental differences that are often elided in studies of the period. A fundamental change, particularly for the interaction with theatre audiences, is the burgeoning media world that developed during the long eighteenth century. Felicity Nussbaum's contention that Siddons 'was able to draw upon more than a century of female performance models to mold that inimitable public self' rightly points out that earlier actresses' success clearly fed into Siddons's approach to her art.[77] She does not, however, acknowledge the different mediascape within which Siddons and her contemporaries operated, compared with their predecessors. There is a case to be made that though earlier actresses were famous – perhaps even proto-celebrities – 'media stars' (the basis of contemporary celebrity) appeared only from the 1770s with the consistent, persistent news reports.

In thinking about these novels, I draw upon Kathleen Anderson's identification of what she terms the 'actress-narrative', which 'vividly represents professional actresses' and other women's manipulation of the inevitable paradox of public privacy in their lives'.[78] Anderson discusses not only novels but also memoirs as spaces in which women could direct the narrative or challenge conventional ideas about propriety, actresses and social norms. Crucially,

[77] Nussbaum, p. 280.
[78] Anderson, p. 433.

however, as well as inserting the life stories and experiences of real actresses into their narratives, Burney, Brooke, and Robinson, co-opt newspaper language into their novels by employing similar idiom. In doing so they expose the limits of the 'manipulation' Anderson identifies in actress-narratives, or rather the continued possibilities of manipulation of publicity beyond the actress herself. To put it another way, the fact that these writers made use of the same the kinds of publicity found in newspapers in their novels draws attention to the limited control one has over one's public image. A public identity was neither stable nor the property of an individual. There is no monopoly on creating public characters; once in the public domain a 'character' could be re-circulated and re-mediated in ways beyond the original intention.

Over the century the 'actress' as a fictional character also featured on the stage, drawing upon various kinds of stereotypes about players. In Kitty Clive's *The Rehearsal; or Bayes in Petticoats* (1751), for example, the actress took the part of the dramatist Mrs. Hazard; 'Kitty Clive' is an unseen character, who refuses to attend rehearsal, and so Mrs. Hazard rehearses in her place.[79] The joke is predicated on the audience's familiarity with Clive, and because Clive appeared onstage laughing at herself. In a novel-fiction, Frances Burney makes us aware of another way in which the fictional actress can circulate off-stage. Burney plays with the sexually ambiguous status of actresses in *Evelina* (1778) when the titular character is mistaken for one at Vauxhall Gardens, after walking without a chaperone, making her fair sexual game.[80] So too the inclusion of scenes involving private theatricals in novels was often used to signal concerns about the sexual propriety of leading ladies.[81] These novels could draw on the theatre in this way because tropes about actresses as sex symbols, divas, professionals and muses were

[79] Catherine Clive, *The Rehearsal; or, Bays in Petticoats*, ed. by Noel Chevalier, in *Popular Plays by Women in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Tanya Caldwell (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2011), II. 1, pp. 182-83.
[80] Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody, 3 vols (London: Penguin), II, pp. 219-20.
[81] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. by John Wiltshire, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*, ed. by Janet M. Todd, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), I, chs. 12-16 and I I chs. 1-2 (pp. 142-228); Frances Burney, *The Wanderer, or, Female Difficulties*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody, Robert L. Mack, and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I, chs. 8-11 (pp. 67-102); Maria Edgeworth, *Patronage*, 4 vols (London: Pandora, 1986), III, chs 17 and 18 (pp. 346-71).

familiar – and circulated in large part by the newspapers. ‘The actress’ was a cultural force and real actresses were obliged, if they were to succeed, to ‘fit’ into the language available. In turn, novelists turned to the depictions of real actresses, as found in the press, to conjure fictional actresses. These novels draw on contemporary stereotypes, but so too, the real actresses’ public selves were akin to fictional characters, with narratives that play out in the newspapers.

The satirical representation of the newspaper in *The Actress of the Present Day* refers to a tradition over a hundred years in the making. Despite the generic features and conventional language of newspaper content, particularly the commonly deployed puffs, it was not a monoculture. In the case studies that follow, I tease out the differences in the representations of Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Farren and Mary Wells – each with very different reputations – in the pages of newspapers.

Part II

CHAPTER 3: SIDDONS THE STROLLER

'Siddonian, adj. in the style of, or typical of, the acting of Sarah Siddons'[1]

Such was Sarah Siddons's (1755-1831) success on the eighteenth-century stage that her name became an adjective. No surprise, then, that there has been much interest in her life and career. She is the subject of numerous biographies, albeit the most recent one was written in 1970.[2] More recently, however, Siddons has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies, which draw attention to the key motifs that permeated her public image: 'Tragic Queen', sublimity, masculinity and maternity.[3] Research by Judith Pascoe and Lisa Crafton Plummer has placed Siddons within a literary context, whilst research by Robyn Asleson and Heather McPherson

[1] 'Siddonian, adj.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/179254?redirectedFrom=siddonian#eid> [accessed 05 February 2017].

[2] James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons: Interspersed with Anecdotes of Authors and Actors*, 2 vols (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1827); Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, 2 vols (London: E. Wilson, 1834); Percy Fitzgerald, *The Kembles: An Account of the Kemble Family, Including the Lives of Mrs. Siddons, and Her Brother John Philip Kemble*, 2 vols (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871); Florence Mary Parsons, *The Incomparable Siddons* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909); Yvonne Ffrench, *Mrs. Siddons: Tragic Actress* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1936); Roger Manvell, *Sarah Siddons: Portrait of an Actress* (London: Heinemann, 1970).

[3] Brooks, *Playing Women*, pp. 93-141; Helen E. M. Brooks, 'Actresses, Motherhood, and the Profession of the Stage. The Divided Heart of the Actress: Late Eighteenth-Century Actresses and the "Cult of Maternity"', in *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660-1830,* ed. by Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr (Lanham, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014), pp. 19-42; Ellen Donkin, 'Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater', in *Critical Theory and Performance: Revised and Enlarged Edition,* ed. by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 317-33; Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*; Laura Engel, 'Mommy Diva: The Divided Loyalties of Sarah Siddons', in *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660-1830,* ed. by Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr (Lanham, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014), pp. 217-32; Ellen Malenas Ledoux, 'Working Mothers on the Romantic Stage: Sarah Siddons and Mary Robinson', in *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660-1830,* ed. by Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr (Lanham, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014), pp. 79-10; Pat Rogers, '"Towering Beyond Her Sex": Stature and Sublimity in the Achievement of Sarah Siddons', in *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theatre, 1660-1820,* ed. by Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991); Laura J. Rosenthal, 'The Sublime, the Beautiful, "the Siddons"', in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century,* ed. by Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (Delaware and London: University of Delaware Press and Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 56-79; Shearer West, *Roles and Role Models: Montagu, Siddons, Lady Macbeth,* in *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830*, ed. by Elizabeth Eger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

reveals Siddons's centrality to British art culture.[4] These studies draw upon a range of materials; her repertoire, memoir, portraits, prints and even chess sets. But there has been little work on her contemporary press coverage, with the exception of the famous periodical essay by William Hazlitt, 'Mrs. Siddons', that I will turn to at the end of this chapter. First, however, I will showcase the influence of the press at the start of her career.

The press played a dual role in Siddons's celebrity; first, newspapers and magazines helped to create a Siddonian idiom at the start of her career that helped to sustain her public identity for three decades, and second, it helped transform her contemporary popularity into a posthumous legacy. In short, much of 'the Siddons' was created off-stage – and not by her. This chapter revisits three key periods in Siddons's career and reappraises them in terms of her interaction with the press, which was influential in creating a Siddonian idiom that helped to shape the audience response to her on and off-stage persona: first, her unsuccessful London debut season 1775/76; second, the unprecedented 'Siddonsmania' of the 1780s; and third, the shifting media responses to her at the close of her career.

Central to this history is Siddons's depiction in the press as a strolling player and her theatrical family. She began her acting life as part of her father, Roger Kemble's, travelling 'Company of Comedians', established by her grandfather, John Ward. Later press coverage frequently turned upon her itinerant history and her membership of the theatrical Kemble family. Jacky Bratton draws attention to the importance of 'kinship networks' as 'engines of induction, training and inheritance within the profession, and the […] internal, sometimes hidden, power structures'.[5] Though Siddons's family and itinerant history would later become

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[4] Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), see esp. ch. 1, 'Sarah Siddons and the Performative Female', pp. 12-32; Lisa Plummer Crafton, *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), see esp. ch. 6, 'Retaliatory Self-Invention: Siddons, Wollstonecraft and Theatricality', pp.109-134; Asleson ed. *A Passion for Performance*; McPherson, *Art and Celebrity,* see esp. ch. 3, 'Staging Celebrity: Siddons and Tragic Pallor', pp. 101-126.

[5] Bratton, p. 178.

a crucial part of her print celebrity, and she would repackage strolling as 'summer touring', in her early days it was a liability. To understand Siddons's media representations, we need first to understand the ways in which theatrical itinerancy was depicted during the eighteenth century.

A Brief History of Strolling

Strollers had long been the butt of jokes; evidence from plays reveals that they were to be considered second-rate from at least the Elizabethan period.[6] Criticism of strollers worsened in relation to the rise of London stages as the cultural and legal theatrical centre; the Vagrancy Act 1713 formally proscribed itinerancy, and the Licensing Act 1737 specifically limited professional spoken-word drama to the patent theatres Drury Lane and Covent Garden.[7] Moreover the Act conferred legal authority and professional status on the London players that was unavailable to their provincial counterparts.[8]

Kristina Straub contends that in anti-theatrical writing 'players' work' was presented as 'leisure' and this was key to the conception of players as vagabonds.[9] She argues that the 'material and ideological conditions of players' were adversely affected by the negative implications of vagrancy as they 'dealt with the effects of being socially constructed, at least potentially, as outlaws'. But the figure of the stroller in the popular imagination over the eighteenth century was more dynamic, protean and often more sympathetic than Straub credits; it is too simple to reduce the stroller simply to a pathologised identity plaguing players.[10]

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[6] Alwin Thaler, 'Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shakspere [Sic]', *PMLA,* 37 (1922), 243-80 (p. 244).
[7] Thomas, pp. 96-97 and 102-05.
[8] Smith, p. 141. For a history of strolling in Britain see Herschel Clay Baker, 'Strolling Actors in Eighteenth-Century England', *Studies in English,* 21 (1941), 100-20; Sybil Marion Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players & Drama in the Provinces, 1660-1765* (Cambridge: University Press, 1939).
[9] Straub, pp. 158-59.
[10] For a list of contemporary materials on strollers see Elbridge Colby, 'Strolling Players in the Eighteenth Century', *Notes and Queries,* s11-XII, 311 (11 December 1915), 454-57 and s12-IX, 176 (27 August 1921), 168-68; Thornton S. Graves, 'Strolling Players in the Eighteenth Century', *Notes and Queries,* s13-I, 1 (7 July 1923),

In *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (1755), published the year of Siddons's birth, Charlotte Charke presents the perils of life as a strolling player; at one point she is arrested.[11] But strolling could offer opportunities unavailable in the capital. In 1745, for instance, actress Susannah Cibber wrote to David Garrick (prior to his becoming manager of Drury Lane) to suggest that they set up a strolling troupe together.[12] Garrick rejected the plan, but the suggestion evinces the potential opportunities for acting work and management to be found on the provincial circuit, especially for those marginalised by the London management system.

In practice, whether strollers were prosecuted depended on local magistrates, though Alwin Thaler argues that 'the generality of men were glad to have the strollers come to town'.[13] In fact, I suggest, much of the negative associations with strollers came from patent theatres trying to assert their authority. Until the establishment of theatrical patents in provincial towns and cities later in the century (Bath, 1768; Liverpool, 1772; Bristol, 1778), all country players of spoken-word drama were technically illegal. Nevertheless, we find numerous references in diaries, letters and memoirs to suggest that people of all classes watched strolling companies.

In No. 42 of *The Spectator* (18 April 1711) Joseph Addison complained about the ostentatious spectacle of the 'English stage'.[14] A week later, in No. 48 (25 April 1711), a correspondent [Richard Steele] responded by reviewing a 'Company of Strolers' that is 'so very far from falling into these false Gallantries, that the Stage is here in its original Situation of a cart'.[15] In particular he describes the poverty of their costumes:

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[11] Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*, ed. by Robert Rehder (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

[12] Helen Brooks, 'Your Sincere Friend and Humble Servant': Evidence of Managerial Aspirations in Susannah Cibber's Letters', *Studies in Theatre and Performance,* 28 (2008), 147-59 (p. 148).

[13] Thaler, p. 244.

[14] Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 5 vols, ed. by Donald Frederic Bond, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), I, *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online* <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198186106.book.1>, pp.177-80

[15] Ibid., p. 207.

> Alexander the Great was acted by a Fellow in a Paper Cravat. The next Day, the Earl of Essex seemed to have no Distress but his Poverty: And my Lord Foppington the same Morning wanted any better Means to show himself Fop, than by wearing Stockings of different Colours.[16]

Whereas Addison complains that 'the ordinary Method of making an Heroe [sic], is to clap a huge Plume of Feathers on his head', here the reverse is true: the material conditions for the strolling players render the performances ridiculous.[17]

The idea of strollers as public menaces, however, shadows the final half of the letter: in which one 'Mr. Justice Overdo' (name taken from Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*) reportedly interrupts the performance to shout out to the players, 'If they were so good at finding the Way to Peoples Hearts, they should do it at the End of Bridges or Church-porches, in their proper Vocation as Beggars'.[18] Clearly the idea of stroller as vagabond had currency in the early eighteenth-century and the conflation between strolling players and vagabonds underlined assumptions about itinerant troupes throughout the century. Hostility to the stage because of its potential to disrupt social order in this way remained a theme throughout the century; in September 1792 the *European Magazine* described the various 'inconveniences attending the Country Stage' and 'endeavours [to] rescue one inexperienced person from an impudent, and in many places an illegal, profession'.[19]

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 178.
[18] Ibid., p. 208.
[19] 'Dissertation on the Country Stage', *European Magazine*, vol. 22 (September 1792), pp. 230-31 (p. 231).

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Figure 1 William Hogarth, *Strollers Actresses Dressing in a Barn*, 1738, engraving print on paper © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Published the year after the 1737 Licensing Act, William Hogarth's *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* (1738) is set on the eve of the Act coming into force. In the bottom left-hand corner lies a part of the Licensing Act and a playbill stating that it is the group's final performance. At first glance it captures the kinds of dissolute, disreputable and dishevelled impression of itinerant troupes that had currency for much of the century. On closer inspection, however, as Jenny Uglow observes, there is a sense of 'stature, mystery and grace' in the scene that is to be curtailed by the imminent Licensing Act.[20] There is 'danger', suggests Uglow, 'for the viewer […] of being seduced by what you see'.[21] The man looking in from the broken roof reminds us that actresses are always on display, are always considered sexual objects. But he

[20] Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 311-15.
[21] Ibid., p. 314.

also represents a more general urge for the public to peep behind the curtain. Hogarth's image, then, at once draws attention to the wondrous possibilities of the theatrical world whilst also warns about its power to 'seduce', as well as merging the poverty of the strollers' lives with the fantastical props. Hogarth revels in the strollers' ambiguous social status and casts, perhaps, a sombre note at their ending.

Hogarth's thoughtful response to strollers was not shared by all; the moralist Reverend Vicesimus Knox alluded to the degenerate image of the itinerant player in *Liberal Education* (1781), in which he hazards against school plays for boys: 'I doubt whether a boy will be the better for emulating a stroller in a barn'.[22] Knox's recourse to the stroller, rather than actors more generally, is telling; players on the London stage were increasingly considered as part of the professional – sometimes even polite – classes, but strollers remained cast variously as social menaces, roguish vagabonds, simple country bumpkins and only amateur players.

On seeing a 'Company of Strollers' Amabel Yorke opines that 'a wofuller [sic] Set were never got together. Ld. & Ldy. [sic] J. bespoke the Busy-body, & I could hardly have thought even Strollers could have made that Play so dull' and 'if I could transmit some of their Tones upon Paper, I believe I could make you laugh […] Her Majesty hooted like an Owl, on taking leave of her Children, & how the Ld. Mayor of London spoke exactly like a Yorkshire Farmer'.[23] Criticisms of strollers' performance standards, as well as social standing, was common. Garrick, who briefly worked in the Ipswich company at the start of his career, would later complain: 'I don't know how it is, but the Strollers are a hundred years behind–we in Town are Endeavouring to bring the Sock & Buskin down to Nature, but they still keep their strutting, Bouncing, and Mouthing, that with whiskers on'.[24] Garrick was, of course, pioneering

[22] Vicesimus Knox, *Liberal Education: Or, a Practical Treatise on the Methods of Acquiring Useful and Polite Learning.* (London: Charles Dilly, 1781), pp. 183-84.
[23] Bedford, Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service, Lucas Archive, L30/13/12/44
[24] Qtd. in Kalman A. Burnim, *David Garrick, Director* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1961); Garrick, *The Letters of David Garrick*, p. 367.

a new acting style that required older forms to be reconceived by the public as outmoded, thus reinforcing his superiority. But more generally it served the interests of London managers to promote their authority by denouncing that of the itinerant players.

Several farces (largely first staged in London) turn on stereotypes about strollers, as a means of policing the profession. In Arthur Murphy's *The Apprentice* (1756), runaway apprentice Dick Wingate has joined a group of itinerant players who have been 'taken up by the Magistrate, and committed as Vagabonds, to Jail'.[25] In the frame device to *The Minor* (1760) Samuel Foote complains about a member of the company: 'Sir, this will never do, you must get rid of your high notes and country cant; oh, 'tis the true strolling'.[26] And in David Garrick's *A Peep Behind the Curtain* (1767) the rakish Wilson, a poor distant relation of the Fuz family, pretends to be a stroller in order to get close to the theatre-mad family and elope with their daughter, Miss Fuz.[27]

Oliver Goldsmith plays upon this theme in his novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), in which Dr. Primrose converses with a stroller without realising the 'impropriety' of being seen to do so (he realises only when a 'mob' approaches) and is questioned as to whether he is the 'chaplain to the company' or merely in costume.[28] It is later revealed that his son has turned stroller.[29] Six years earlier, Goldsmith penned "The Adventures of a Strolling Player" in the *British Magazine* (October 1760), written from the perspective of the stroller, and shortly before his death, he apparently began a version of Paul Scarron's *Le Roman Comique* (1651–1657), a tale about a strolling troupe, published posthumously in 1775.[30]

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[25] Arthur Murphy, *The Apprentice* (London: P. Vaillant, 1756), I.1, p.5.
[26] Samuel Foote, *The Minor,* in *The Routledge Anthology of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Drama*, ed. by Kristina Straub, Misty G. Anderson, and Daniel O'Quinn (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 620.
[27] David Garrick, *A Peep Behind the Curtain; or, the New Rehearsal in The Plays of David Garrick,* ed. by Frederick Louis Bergamann and Harry William Pedicord, 2 vols (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).
[28] Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, ed. by Stephen Coote (London: Penguin, 1986), p.111-113.
[29] Ibid, p.119.
[30] For detail about this book see Harold Stein, 'Goldsmith's Translation of the Roman Comique', *Modern Language Notes,* 49 (1934), 171-78.

Novelist, playwright, and former actor Thomas Holcroft drew on his experiences as a strolling player in the Kemble Company in the early 1770s in *Alwyn, or The Gentleman Comedian* (1780). Holcroft presents the typical ineptitude of a strolling troupe: aging player Truncheon Stentor writes to Jemmy Drumshandrugh (an actor in a neighbouring acting troupe) about a production of Henry IV, Part 1, in which the actor-manager Roger (Siddons's father's name) plays Douglas, whilst his son Daniel (emphasising the familial links), plays Sir Walter Blunt: 'the termagant Scot, as Falstaff calls him, is to kill Sir Walter; but when our pudding-headed director entered, instead of slaying the knight his son, he only stood to receive one thrust from him, then tumbled upon the stage'.[31] The actor-manager obstinately believes he is in the right, despite his wife's furious entreaties, until the audience respond 'in an uproar of laughter' and he realises his mistake.[32]

A theme of amateurism and sense of unintentional comedy runs through depictions of strollers. Charke, the daughter of actor-manager Colley Cibber, casts strollers as amateurish and inept:

> 'Tis a Pity that so many, who have good Trades, should idly quit them, to become despicable Actors; which renders them useless to themselves, and very often Nusances [sic] to others. Those who were bred up in the Profession, have the best Right to make it their Calling; but their Rights are horribly invaded by Barbers 'Prentices, Taylors and Journeymen Weavers; all which bear such strong Marks of their Professions, that I have seen *Richard* the Third murder *Henry* the Sixth with a Shuttle, and *Orestes* jump off the Shop-Board to address *Hermione*.[33]

There are several ironies to Charke's commentary not least because she plays (temporarily) at several professions throughout the *Narrative*.[34] Despite her pedigree, Charke was in fact

[31] Thomas Holcroft, *Alwyn*, ed. by Rick Incorvati, in *The Novels and Selected Plays of Thomas Holcroft*, ed. by W. M. Verhoeven, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), I, p. 113.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Charke, p. 98.
[34] An early example of this is pretending to be a doctor pp.18-19.

estranged from her father and her itinerancy marks her exclusion from the London theatrical scene. Moreover, Charke's depiction of a rag-tag itinerant troupe belies the fact that many companies were bound together by kin, and furthermore, that its players often worked on the patent stages too.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, however, representations of strollers appear to become increasingly sympathetic, although strollers were still associated with rusticity. 'An Epilogue at the End of the Season for a Company of Strollers in a Barn, spoken by a young Actress in a russet Gown' printed in the *London Magazine* (September 1773), defends strollers against accusations of being a threat.[35] The speaker acknowledges the differences between their 'humble stage' (a barn) and London theatres: 'Nor are our Booths and Bettertons so vain,/To think you'd take our house for Drury Lane'.

On stage too, the figure of the stroller was no longer simply the butt of jokes. John O'Keefe's *A Beggar on Horseback* (1785) and *Wild Oats* (1791) feature prodigal sons (Horace and Jack Rover), who are embraced by the acting profession, but by play's close are reunited with their 'real' family.[36] This, of course, complicates the positive portrayal of strollers (they are not in the end really strollers), but nevertheless serves to show that itinerant players were no longer simply represented as roguish vagabonds. George Colman the Younger's interlude *Sylvester Daggerwood; or New Hay at the Old Market* (1795) affectionately treats the itinerant player; Daggerwood is kindly but simple, and speaks in a pastiche of Shakespearean quotations.[37] The character was popular; O'Keeffe returns to the character in the unpublished *The Eleventh of June; or, The Daggerwoods at Dunstable* (1796) and in 1806 Peter Pangloss

[35] *London Magazine*, vol. 42 (September 1773), p.458.
[36] O'Keeffe, *A Beggar* ; John O'Keeffe, *Wild Oats,* in *The Dramatic Works of John O'Keeffe*, 4 vols (Printed for the author, by T. Woodfall, 1798), II.
[37] George Colman the Younger, *New Hay at the Old Market*, ed. by Peter A. Tasch*,* in *The Plays of George Colman the Younger*, 2 vols (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1981).

[pseud.] published Daggerwood's 'biography', *Memoirs of Sylvester Daggerwood*.[38]

John Oldmixon used the stroller politically in order to disrupt the sway the patent London managers had over spoken word drama. *Apollo Turn'd Stroller; or, Thereby Hangs a Tale* (1787) is a sung-through 'musical pasticcio' staged at the Royalty Theatre. David Worrall draws attention to the 'allegorical parallels' between the plot and the threats to the Royalty from patent managers.[39] The God Apollo is banished by Jupiter from Heaven and joins a company of strollers on earth. Albeit more sympathetic portrayals, the strollers are little more than symbolic archetypes, drawing on stereotypes of idealised, country-bumpkin-like, rogues: 'How merrily we live that strollers be. / Cheerfully, the we chant our merry glee'.[40]

Despite their rustic charm, the girls, according to local woman Mysis, 'are crazed' because

> The players that have got Sileno's barn
> Have hit their fancies to a very turn;
> They think of nought but plays, and such bad doings,
> And in the end I fear 'twill prove their ruins'.[41]

Not willing to risk her daughters' virtue, Mysis asks Pan to help her get rid of the players and they go together to the Justice (Midas) whilst her daughters go to forewarn the players. Mysis, Pan and Midas describe the strollers negatively as 'vagrants', 'vagabonds', 'rogues' and 'varlets contraband'; Midas even attacks 'their dancing, singing, spouting', and does not even credit them with acting.[42] But it is not the strollers we dislike; Mysis, Pan and Midas are the real threats. The play ends when Apollo prevents Midas from threatening the players and he

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[38] On O'Keeffe's *The Eleventh of June* (unpublished manuscript, California, The Huntington Library, John Larpent Plays, LA1218), see Smith, p.145; Sylvester Daggerwood [pseud. Peter Pangloss, *Memoirs of Sylvester Daggerwood* (London: M. Allen, 1807).
[39] David Worrall, *Theatric Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 91.
[40] John Oldmixon, *Apollo Turn'd Stroller; or, Thereby Hangs a Tale. A Musical Pasticcio.* (London: S. Bladon, 1787), I, p.7.
[41] Ibid., I, p.8.
[42] Ibid., I, p.18.

ascends back to Heaven.

Like Mysis, Abraham Steady, a fictional correspondent in *The Loiterer*, the Oxford-based newspaper published by James Austen (brother of Jane), worries about strollers as a sexual and social threat. He complains that his obsessive daughters 'attend almost every performance' and 'not content with hearing, are continually spitting some of their nonsensical confounded stuff'.[43] The object of satire here is not the strollers, but rather the alarmist and mildly ridiculous public. A young Jane Austen also playfully employs the comic potential of strollers becoming stars in *Love and Freindship* in which Gustavus and Philander abandon their lives as gentleman to become strolling players in a company of four (in which they act *Macbeth*).[44] Their success leads them to Covent Garden Theatre, where they appear as Quick and Lewis – the names of two successful Covent Garden comics.[45] It is all very silly; Austen here seems to be joking about the inadequacies of itinerant troupes (a cast of four play *Macbeth*), but also shows her familiarity with the theatre, and the potential traffic between the country and the town stages.

At the close of the century we find much resistance against a solely London-centric view of British Theatre. Tate Wilkinson, manager of the Yorkshire circuit, for example, acknowledges that 'our theatrical barometer is much guided by London criticisms and decisions', but reminds readers that 'a London audience, though beyond doubt, the true criterion, is not always infallible, any more than the most eminent physician'.[46] Increasingly the London presses devoted more space to provincial theatre circuit too, not only reports of London stars touring but also to reviews of the general season.

By the early nineteenth century William Hazlitt could write 'A London engagement is

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[43] *The Loiterer*, vol. 1, No. 12, 18 April 1789, p.5.
[44] Jane Austen, *Love and Freindship* in *Juvenilia*, ed. by Peter Sabor, 3 vols, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), II, p. 139-141.
[45] Byrne, *Jane Austen*, p. 30.
[46] Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee; or, a History of the Yorkshire Theatres, from 1770 to the Present Time* (York: printed for the author, by Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), p. 266.

generally considered by actors as the *ne plus ultra* of their ambition […] But this appears to us, who are not in the secret, to be rather the prose termination of their adventurous career'.[47] Though perhaps surprising, Hazlitt's argument is borne out by the fact that several players did not actually move to London despite being asked.[48] In another article, Hazlitt recalls the first encounter with 'that gay waking dream, *a company of strolling players*' in which he presents minor theatres and strolling troupes as a kind of counter culture resisting the established patent venues.[49] Though still not entirely socially respectable the potential threat of strolling had come to be embraced rather than feared.

Indeed, according to Joseph Haslewood in *The Secret History of the Green Room* (1795), several London stars, began their theatrical careers as members of itinerant troupes:

> If we look into the London Theatres we shall find, that the majority of eminent Actors and Actresses have sprung up to their present elevation from the lowest Strolling Companies, by the mere dint of merit and application. Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Jordan, Miss Farren, Mr. King, Mr. Kemble, and many others, may be adduced as instances. They have all been in *Provincial Corps*, their talents lightly esteemed in infancy, and themselves frequently in the utmost distress.[50]

In practice, of course, there was much traffic between London and provincial playing, both in terms of personnel and staging.[51] There is, then, a conflict at the heart of stroller

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[47] William Hazlitt, 'On Actors and Acting', in *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men and Manners* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1817), pp. 236-251 (p.250). First published in *The Examiner* (5 Jan 1817), pp. 8-10.

[48] Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, p. 39. Paula Byrne also discusses Robert William Elliston, who resisted calls from Sheridan to be contracted in London for over a decade.

[49] William Hazlitt, 'Minor Theatres', in *A View of the English Stage* (London: Robert Stodart et al., 1818), pp. 168-179 (p. 169).

[50] Joseph Haslewood, *The Secret History of the Green Room: Containing Authentic and Entertaining Memoirs of the Actors and Actresses in the Three Theatres Royal*, 2 vols (London: H. D. Symmonds, 1792), II, p. 6.

[51] The earliest extant *Hamlet* prompt books, which belonged to Siddons's grandfather, John Ward, suggest that the staging practices of Ward's itinerant Company were transferred decades later to the London stage via her brother, John Philip Kemble. See James G. McManaway, '"The Two Earliest Prompt Books of "Hamlet,"" Illus', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America,* 43 (1949), 288-320 (pp. 319-20); Ann Thompson, "I'll Have Grounds | More Relative Than This': The Puzzle of John Ward's 'Hamlet' Promptbooks', *The Yearbook of English Studies,* 29 (1999), 138-50 (p. 149).

representations; to denigrate strollers served to promote the superiority of London players and yet they were a vital source of these players. The increasingly sympathetic outlook of strollers from the last decade of the eighteenth century, I think, has much to do with Siddons and the transformation of strolling in the popular imagination. At the start of her London career in the mid-1770s, however, her media representation suffered from itinerant associations and it is to this I now turn.

SIDDONS: 'THE HEROINE OF ONE OF THOSE THEATRICAL NURSERIES'

The context of strolling reputation allows us to understand the negative representation of Siddons's initial essay on the London stage in 1775/76, as well as the more long-term effects of her in the media coverage in relation to her strolling history and her theatrical family. Whatever the general impression of strollers, the reality of Siddons's upbringing was relatively respectable due to the status of her theatrical family. Siddons was born into a strolling family founded by her grandparents, John and Sarah Ward, and later managed by her father, Roger Kemble. The Ward-Kemble company was particularly well regarded; unlike other troupes that remained in provincial towns for only short periods, their engagements lasted for several weeks; in 1764, for example, they began a twenty-five week stint in Hereford.[52]

Siddons earliest recorded appearance was on 12 February 1767 at the King's Head, Worcester, as the Young Princess Elizabeth in William Havard's *Charles the First* (1737), in which her father, mother, brother, sister and future husband (William Siddons) also appeared.[53] She continued in the company until shortly after her marriage, after which she and William joined a more genteel strolling circuit that included Cheltenham, which attracted a more polite

[52] McManaway, p. 308.
[53] Manvell, pp. 13-14. Campbell, I, pp. 37-8.

audience, and brought her to Garrick's notice. After months of protracted negotiations Siddons was contracted to appear at Drury Lane.

Her prospect of success was almost immediately dampened: pregnancy prevented her appearing at the start of the season, which meant another provincial newcomer, Mary King from Wilkinson's Yorkshire Company, had the advantage not only of appearing first (on 13 October 1775), but appearing in the role Siddons desired for her debut (Rosalind in *As You Like It*). King enjoyed superior press attention in advance of her debut, likely in part due to her experience in more established regional companies, compared to the smaller provincial troupes Siddons had worked in. Unlike Siddons, King was named in the press, rather than being listed simply as a 'Young Lady', which suggests she had some reputation already.[54]

The comparative lack of promotional material for Siddons may be linked to Garrick's motive in bringing in new actresses in the first place: to destabilise the power of his three leading ladies, Elizabeth Younge, Frances Abington and Mary Ann Yates.[55] It is no surprise that the *Gazetteer* (14 October 1775), a paper in which Garrick had interest, was roused in support of King: 'she will in a little time rival our first actresses' the paper declared following her debut. So too the *Morning Chronicle* (14 October 1775) seized 'the earliest opportunity of congratulating the public on the accession of Mrs. King' and boldly claims that '[o]n the whole, we know no actress who could have excelled her in this part, except, perhaps, Mrs. Barry'. [56] These puffs were designed no doubt to annoy the others given that King barely appeared for the rest of the season and was not engaged the following year. By the time of Siddons's appearance, Garrick's point had been made and she received little comparable promotion in the *Gazetteer*.

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[54] *Public Advertiser*, 11 October 1775; *Gazetteer*, 11 October 1775.
[55] On Garrick's trouble with his leading ladies, see Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, 2 vols (London: Printed for the Author, 1780), II, pp. 317-19.
[56] More praise was published in the *Lloyd's Evening Post,* 13-16 October 1775; *General Evening Post,* 12-14 October 1775.

Siddons debuted on 29 December 1775 as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Although the part was listed as one of her preferred roles in a letter to Garrick prior to joining the company, Siddons would remember it as 'a Character in which it was not likely that I should excite any great sensation'.[57] Though the *Public Advertiser* (30 December 1775) reported that she was 'received with great Applause' there was certainly a muted response in other papers. The *Middlesex Journal* (28-30 December 1775) sets the tone for the season:

> Last night a young Lady made her first appearance on a London Theatre in Drury-Lane, in the character of Portia, in the Merchant of Venice. The most accomplished actress can display little other abilities in a part than a correct elocution, and a knowledge of the author. The Lady of last night being thus circumstanced, it is impossible to pronounce what the nature or extent of her powers may enable her to execute when placed in a situation that calls them forth. But, from the specimen she gave, there is not room to expect any thing beyond mediocrity. Her figure and face, tho' agreeable, have nothing striking; her voice (that great requisite of all public speakers) is far from being favourable to her progress as an actress. It is feared she possesses a monotony not to be got rid of; there is also a vulgarity in her tones, ill calculated to sustain that line in a Theatre, she has at first been held forth in; but as these observations are formed when the Lady laboured under the disadvantage of a first attempt in the metropolis, her future efforts perhaps may entirely remove them.

Though the reviewer allows for the 'disadvantage of a first attempt in the metropolis', overall his sarcastic tone suggests that Siddons barely achieves the most basic performance standards; where she errs most (her voice), 'it is feared' she may be irredeemable. Such a review was hardly likely to induce interest in her future performances: neither terrible enough for her to become a curiosity nor impressive enough to be a success.

Underlining the criticism of the 'vulgarity of her tones' is antipathy towards Siddons's provincial origins. A review in the *Morning Chronicle* (30 December 1775), edited by William

[57] Sarah Siddons, *The Reminiscences of Sarah Kemble Siddons, 1773-1785*, ed. by William Van Lennep (Cambridge, MA: Widener Library, 1942), p. 5.

Woodfall, a serious but fair-minded pioneer of theatrical criticism, makes this explicit:

> The Portia of yesterday evening's Merchant of Venice was last summer the heroine of one of those theatrical nurseries, the petty parties of travelling Comedians. In France it is common to enlist performers into the Paris Commonwealth company from the Provincial troops, and many of our first performers have risen from as humble a situation; nay, even the mighty Roscius tried his strength in Ipswich.

In light of the vexed position itinerant players had in eighteenth-century society, this can only be described as faint praise; to refer to Roscius (Garrick), is surely to imply the unlikeliness of Siddons's chance of success, given that he was an exception rather than the rule. In short, although the reviewer does go on to claim that she 'bids fair to become one of its [the stage's] ornaments', Siddons's kinship with strollers did little to enhance her reputation in London. Her voice is singled out as 'rather deficient in variety and clearness of tone', though commensurate with the general trend to be kind to debut players, the writer suggests that 'this defect might be ascribable either to a cold, or to that want of collectedness which is ever discoverable on a first appearance in a Theatre Royal'.

It was not only newspapers that criticised her voice. Drury Lane prompter, Thomas Hopkins (d.1780), records her debut in his diary thus: 'Portia by Mrs. Siddons being her first appearance upon this Stage, a good figure rather handsome – wants Spirit and ease – her Voice a little Coarse, very well receiv'd'.[58] Even the otherwise complimentary *Morning Post* (30 December 1775) conceded 'that at times her voice was rather low'. These criticisms, though not directly concerned with itinerancy, should not be overlooked given her provincial origins.

As Christina Davidson argues, there was a preoccupation with voice and personal character in polite society in the 1770s.[59] Just as physiognomy was promoted as a means by

[58] Washington D.C, Folger Library, Folger MS W.a.104 (13) 29 Dec 1775. With thanks to the Folger Library for sharing copies of the Diary with me.
[59] Christina Davidson, '"To Speak as Others Speak": Privileged and "Vulgar" Voices in *Evelina*, by Frances Burney', *Women's Writing,* 23.1 (January 2016), 33-52 (pp. 33-35).

which character could be detected, voice too was used to denote personality.[60] Davidson reminds us that it was during this period that 'standard, polite forms' of speech emerged that 'marginalised' others.[61] Writing about Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), Davidson notes that 'Burney's novels rarely feature representations of regional dialects, unless they are to signify something ridiculous or worthy of serious censure in the speaker. She therefore tidies up and neutralizes the speech of her regional characters when she wants to signify the presence of intrinsic virtue'.[62] Davidson argues that there were concerns throughout the century about the 'influence of "low" people', impolite verbal mannerisms (including vulgar colloquialism, inappropriate use of the French language, and fashionable expressions), as well as the ability to adopt of one kind of speech pattern over another, thereby confusing social hierarchy or distorting expectations (particularly Evelina's) of status.[63]

Burney's use of regional voices as sub-standard echoes the media responses to Siddons. Of course, attention to the voice was a common concern in theatrical reviews.[64] Regional players faced particular criticism; Peter Holland notes that even the much-lauded David Garrick's voice came under scrutiny because of 'some Lichfield tinges' and Thomas Sheridan (father of Richard, and later elocution master for Siddons) recommended that provincial actors distance themselves from their provincial accents.[65] The *Middlesex Journal* (24-26 October 1775) which would go on to condemn Siddons's voice, commented that 'the tone of [King's] voice is as elegantly feminine as can be conceived' and the *Morning Chronicle* (14 October

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[60] For physiogonmy, see Pointon, p. 94.
[61] Davidson, pp. 33-35.
[62] Ibid., p. 34.
[63] Ibid., p. 36.
[64] Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 36; Judith Fisher, "The Quality of Mercy' in the Eighteenth Century; or, Kitty Clive's Portia', *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research,* 14 (1999), 19 (p. 36). See also Glen McGillivray, 'Rant, Cant and Tone: The Voice of the Eighteenth-Century Actor and Sarah Siddons', *Theatre Notebook*, 71.1 (2017), pp. 2-20.
[65] Peter Holland, 'Hearing the Dead: The Sound of David Garrick', in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance, 1660-1800,* ed. by Michael Cordner and Peter Holland (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 248-270 (p. 253).

1775) remarked that 'her voice, though not very forcible, is remarkably clear and well toned, her elocution just and sensible'. Conversely, however, prompter Hopkins records 'Mrs. King's has a course [sic] Voice – and does not speak very naturally'.[66] Perhaps given Garrick's desire to use King against his established actresses, he suppressed criticism of it, though following her second appearance (as Araminta in *The School for Lovers*) the *Morning Chronicle* (25 October 1775) lamented that 'we wish we could add, she proved that she was not an addition to the number of monotonists now in the London Theatres'.

Returning to Siddons, the lacklustre response to her 'low' voice has been interpreted by Roger Manvell as Siddons struggling to adapt to larger auditorium at Drury Lane, by Judith Pascoe as Siddons's voice having difficulty rising over the din of more experienced actors in well-established roles', and by David Worrall as her inability to overcome the rowdiness of the Drury Lane audience, which led to a 'coarse' sound. [67] A plausible alternative is that Siddons's voice drew attention to her provincial origins, though only Shearer West links the 'accusations' in the reviews to 'prevailing metropolitan prejudice'.[68]

Though Henry Bate, Garrick's talent scout who recommended Siddons for Drury Lane, remarked that she had 'contracted no strolling habits, wch [sic] have so often been the bane of many a theatrical genius', perhaps due to her upbringing in a 'respectable' company, he did complain about her voice:

> It is necessary after this panegyric, however to inform you, that her voice struck me at firsts as rather dissonant; & I fancy from the private conversation I had with her that in unimpassioned scenes it must be somewhat grating: however, as I found it wear away as the business became more interesting, I am inclined to think it only an

[66] Cross-Hopkins Diary qtd. in *The London Stage, 1600-1830: Part 4: 1747-1776*, ed. by G. W. Stone (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), III, p.1918.
[67] Manvell, p. 33; Pascoe, *Sarah Siddons*, p. 35. David Worrall, *Garrick and Noise: Auditorium Disturbances at Drury Lane*, (Kingston University, 25-27 June 2014); *Macklin, Mansfield and the End of Anti-Actor Rioting*, (Trinity College Dublin, 17-18 February 2017), pp. 1-13 (p. 4). At time of writing these conference papers are unpublished. Thank you to Professor Worrall for sharing these unpublished written drafts with me in an email correspondence, 2016-17.
[68] Shearer West, 'The Public and Private Roles of Sarah Siddons', in *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists,* ed. by Robyn Asleson (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), pp. 1-40 (p. 33).

> error of affectation, which may be corrected if not totally [emended?].[69]

There is distinct criticism of her voice as 'dissonant' and 'grating', but it is not condemned for its quietness. Clearly, then, the problems with Siddons's voice were not limited to appearing in a larger, noisier venue like Drury Lane. That is not to say that inaudibility played no part in her mediocre performance, but that when reviewers did hear her, what they heard was 'monotony' and 'vulgarity'. The term 'low', of course, can also mean common or inferior (much like 'coarse'), which also fits with Bate's description of her 'grating' voice in private conversation. The 'affectation' noted by Bate perhaps indicates an attempt to sound like an actress.[70] When Frances Burney met Siddons many years later (she does not appear to have noticed Siddons during her 1775/76 season despite attending the theatre) she complained of her 'deep & dragging' off-stage voice.[71]

The sole predominantly positive account of her debut as Portia appeared in the *Morning Post* (30 December 1775) – and did not directly allude to her itinerant past.

> Allowing for her [Siddons] great natural diffidence (no unpromising presage of her future excellence) we think it one of the most respectable first essays ever seen on either Theatre Royal. Her figure is a very fine one–her features are beautifully expressive, her action graceful, and easy, and her whole deportment that of a gentlewoman; but her forte seems to be that of enforcing the beauties of her author by an emphatical, though easy art, almost peculiar to herself–her fears last night so far prevented her from doing justice to her powers, that at times her voice was rather low; however we are convinced from this specimen of her theatrical abilities, that now having secured a footing in the first school, she cannot fail to rise to great eminence in her profession.–She was received with the warmest applause, by a splendid and numerous

[69] London, British Library, Add MS 25383. The final word [emended] is unclear in the manuscript, I follow Manvell, p. 23.
[70] 'affectation' was a common accusation levelled at actresses, for example; the *Morning Post* (10 November 1777) wrote of Mrs. Mattocks's 'usual affectation', and the *Morning Herald* (10 September 1784) desired Miss George to 'check the affectation and vanity' of her performance. By contrast the *Morning Post* (4 May 1780) praised Mrs. Abington's affectation as her 'third beauty' […] where it is necessary'.
[71] Frances Burney, *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney: Vol. 2: 1787*, ed. by Stewart J. Cooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), II, in *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199262809.book.1>, p. 230.

audience.[72]

The exaggeration and superlatives here bear the hallmarks of a typical puff. It also commends Siddons as a 'gentlewoman', perhaps attempting to deflect attention away from criticism of her background and, crucially, names her unlike the other papers (excepting the *Morning Chronicle*, which misnamed her 'Mrs. Siddols'). The assumption that 'fear' prevented Siddons from showcasing her talents fully has been used to explain away her deficiency in the performance.

It is not insignificant that this paper was edited by Bate. Throughout the season the *Morning Post* remained notably supportive of Siddons. Following Portia, Siddons was cast in several minor comic roles for which she received only limited press attention; Epicœne in Colman's revised version of Ben Jonson's comedy *Epicœne; or, The Silent Woman* (1609; adapted by Colman, 1776); Julia in Henry Bate's comic afterpiece *The Blackamoor Wash'd White* (1776) and Maria in Thomas Vaughn's farce *Love's Metamorphoses* (1776). Her role as Epicœne, the titular 'Silent Woman', was an unfortunate joke given the criticism of voice that appeared following her appearance as Portia. Epicœne is the 'silent' wife of Morose, who is revealed to be a boy in disguise in the final scene; silence or at least speaking softly is central to the disguise.[73] We find discrepancies in the reviews; the *Morning Post* (15 January 1776) reported that Siddons 'acquired great applause in the spirited part' whilst the *Middlesex Journal* (13-16 January 1776) reported that she 'was entirely destitute of the necessary fire, when she recovered her speech. Miss Young [sic] would have been the proper Epicœne'. Such differences are not unusual, but rather stand as evidence for the partisan reviewing that took place in the papers. For the most part, however, Siddons received only muted press coverage.

In a largely unremarkable season for Siddons, she did appear in one outright success,

[72] *Early English Newspapers* [Microfilm], London, British Library B/OE1070
[73] Ben Jonson and George Colman the Elder, *Epicœne; or, the Silent Woman* (London: T. Becket, 1776).

Hannah Cowley's *The Runaway* (1776), which was staged seventeen times that season. Siddons played Emily Morley, the eponymous runaway whose hidden identity causes the intrigue that drives the plot. She is the object of affection of the play's protagonist, George Hargrave. She remains a mysterious 'incognita', who refuses to reveal her surname until the end of the play lest it embarrass her family. Emily's determined anonymity may have later influenced Frances Burney, an avid theatregoer, in her later novel *The Wanderer* (1814) in which the mysterious heroine keeps her identity secret (she also showcases her dramatic talent during a private theatrical).[74]

Despite the centrality of Emily to the dramatic plot, she appears infrequently, with other characters talking about her more often than she is seen. Other figures, such as Bella, the high-spirited coquette, and Lady Dinah, the poisonous fifty-year-old women determined to marry George, feature more often and are more developed characters. The audience first encounter Emily outside in the garden, embracing the country, and displaying her natural charm. By contrast Lady Dinah is in her dressing room, putting on her public face through cosmetics.[75]

Troubled by Emily's presence, Lady Dinah enlists her servants to remove her from the house. The following dialogue shows Susan and Jarvis plotting to undermine the runaway's reputation:

> SUSAN: The business is, that we must contrive to open some door for this girl to walk out of the house.
> JARVIS: But how? Upon what ground? When, and where?
> SUSAN: Why, if we could contrive the business, I have no doubt of the spirit and fire of your execution. Do you remember the occupation which once gave employment to these talents of yours– I mean that of itinerant player?
> JARVIS: Oh, yes! I remember the barns that I have made echo with the ravings of Orestes, and the stables in which I have sighed forth the woes of Romeo.

[74] Burney, *The Wanderer*. Her name is later revealed to be Juliet Granville; this character also appears to be running away from something and strolls from town to town.
[75] Hannah Cowley, *The Runaway*, ed. by Tanya Caldwell, in *Popular Plays by Women in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2011). Further references to the play are made in-text.

> SUSAN: Well, but have you any recollection of a pretty Juliet, a tall elegant girl? In short, do you not remember one of the strolling party exceedingly like the strange guest now in the house?
>
> (III.4. p. 243)

The accusation is that the unknown woman is really an itinerant player, in an affirmation of the negative associations of strolling. This allegation takes on greater significance in light of Siddons's history; actress and role conflate during performance and the allusion to strolling brings Siddons's private character to the fore as well as advancing the plot. In the above scene Emily is not present, so this conflation between the character and actress is not explicit. Later, however, Emily is present to hear the accusation:

> MR HARGRAVE: –pray, madam (to Emily)–be so kind to tell us if you know anything of that person (pointing to Jarvis).
> EMILY: No, sir, I believe not. I do not recollect. I may have seen him before.
> JARVIS: Oh, Miss Jenny, you don't recollect–what have you forgotten your old companion, William Jarvis?
> EMILY: I do not remember, indeed, that I was ever honored with such a companion, and the mistake you have made of my name, convinces me that I never was.
> JARVIS: Pshaw, pshaw, this won't do now. You was always a good actress, but behind the scenes, you know, we used to come down from our stilts, and talk in our proper persons. Why, sure, you will not pretend to forget our adventures at Colchester, the affair of the Blue Domino at Warwick, nor the plot which you and Mrs. Vanish laid against the manager at Beconsfield.
> HARRIET: Dear sir, nothing is so evident, as that the man has mistaken this lady for another person. I hope you'll permit us to go without hearing any more of his impertinence.
> MR. HARGRAVE: If he is mistaken, no excuses will be sufficient. I don't know what to say–'tis a perplexing business, but I wish you would be so kind to answer the man, madam.
> EMILY: Astonishment has kept me silent till now, sir, and I must still be silent, for I have not yet been taught to make defenses.
>
> Enter GEORGE behind JARVIS
>
> JARVIS: Dear madam, why surely you have not forgot how often you have been my Juliet, and I your Alexander.
>
> (IV. 3. pp. 259-360)

The scene hints at the unsuitability of strolling players in society both in principle (were Emily actually an actress, she would have been an unsuitable wife for the respectable George) and in actuality (Jarvis's lies do prove he is untrustworthy). Accusing Emily specifically of being a 'good actress', rather than any other trade of a low social position (such as a maid), renders her suspect at all times: everything may be an act. For example, the voice is conceived as a form of mask, which the players take off behind the scenes when they 'talk in their proper persons'. Once again voice features as a clue to true identity, recalling Siddons's own difficulties in persuading the public of her respectability – even if she speaks properly there is always the underlying suspicion that it is an act.

The connections between Siddons and strolling would not have been lost on the audience. By appearing in this scene, Siddons risked the audience constructing her offstage identity through the depiction of itinerancy shown in this exchange. One of her earliest biographers, Thomas Campbell, refers to this moment in the play as 'a somewhat mortifying part for our young actress to personate'.[76] Although the conflation between player and part occurs regularly when watching a performance, this scene demonstrates a particularly heightened example in which the action of the play reflects aspects of the player's life. In acting as Emily, Siddons had to withstand criticisms that could apply to her; her provincial illegitimacy potentially counting against her on the legitimate stage.

Despite being the titular role, Emily features infrequently. The stage is dominated instead by Bella, played by leading lady Elizabeth Younge, who was highly praised in the *Morning Chronicle* (16 February 1776) for her 'characteristic spirit and ease', whilst Siddons was deemed 'more than passable'. Siddons may have preferred this lacklustre review compared to the savage attack in the *St. James's Chronicle* (17-20 February 1776), in which once again her voice is criticised: 'Mrs. Siddons has but few Powers given her by Nature; she speaks

[76] Campbell, I, p. 73.

disagreeably, and her Motions are like Twitches, and give Pain.' Even in the most successful play of the season, the reviews failed to promote, or even really notice, Siddons.

Siddons's debut season coincided with David Garrick's last. Her final performances of the season were in *The Suspicious Husband* (as Mrs. Strickland) and in *Richard III* (as Lady Anne), both plays in which Garrick was particularly lauded. Unsurprisingly the press paid no attention to her at all. If Siddons's strolling history had given her an inauspicious start in the press, then Garrick's upcoming retirement rendered her a non-entity. With little press coverage towards the end of the season it is unsurprising that Richard Sheridan did not renew Siddons's contract upon taking over from Garrick, and so she returned to playing in regional venues for several years. Even when she found success in the provinces, she refused at first to return to London. When she returned the stage was set for unprecedented success – led not least by the re-invention of her strolling family in the press.

THE 'INIMITABLE' MRS. SIDDONS: SIDDONS MANIA IN THE 1780S

Following her failure to re-negotiate an engagement at the end of 1775/76 season, Siddons worked in provincial, albeit politer, venues (Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, York and Bath) until her triumphant return to Drury Lane in 1782, first playing Isabella in *Isabella; or, The Fatal Marriage* (1757), Garrick's reworking of Thomas Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*. By the time she re-appeared in London, the press was buzzing in anticipation – a marked difference from her first season. As Michael R. Booth observes, 'the sheer mass and scale of the reaction to her acting was new'.[77] What follows examines the 'sheer mass and scale' of her press coverage.

[77] Michael R. Booth, Susan Bassnett, and John Stokes, *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 31-32.

A mixed-media campaign preceded her return; Thomas Sedgwick Whalley (1746-1828) published *Verses addressed to Mrs. Siddons on her being engaged at the Drury Lane Theatre* (1782) (later, it is believed, used by Joshua Reynolds as a source for his 1784 *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* portrait); and the artist Thomas Beach (1738-1806) produced two portraits of Siddons in 1782, *Portrait of Mrs Siddons* and *Sarah Siddons as Melancholy in the Character of Milton's* '*Il Penseroso*', displayed at the Society of Artists exhibition.[78] Here our concern is the particular promotional material of Siddons that appeared in the periodical press, which led to her unprecedented success.

The London papers began to mention Siddons's Bath and Bristol performances with increased frequency from 1779 onwards. At first these reports recalled Siddons's inadequacy during her period in London.[79] For example in April 1779 the *Morning Chronicle* reported she was 'greatly improved' by her return to the provinces, and given that 'her powers of voice being limited, the compass of our play house suits them exactly'.[80] By the following year, however, that same paper printed an 'Extract of a letter from Bath' in which the correspondent expresses concern that the 'metropolitan managers' might discover Siddons's 'wonderful improvements' and 'snatch' her, though he hopes that 'her voice may be thought too delicate for that *rear* which the Londoners have been taught to think natural; and which they love, notwithstanding the never to be forgotten example of David Garrick'.[81]

That summer, the papers began to speculate about her return to London. This was not unfounded, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's letter to playwright Joseph Cradock reveals that he was 'endeavouring to engage Mrs. Siddons, of the Bath Theatre' in July 1780.[82] Speculation

[78] McPherson, *Art and Celebrity*, pp. 117-18.
[79] *Morning Herald*, 3 August 1781.
[80] *Morning Chronicle,* 9 April 1779.
[81] *Morning Chronicle,* 6 June 1780.
[82] Letter to Joseph Cradock, 12 July 1780, in Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan,* in *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, ed. by Cecil John Layton Price, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), I, pp. 130-31.

was rife for over a year.[83] By December 1780 the *Morning Herald* described her as 'the best general actress on the stage' and, crucially, rather than suggest that she had needed improvement, the correspondent suggests that by 'some strange fatality, her extensive merit was unknown' until her Bath engagement.[84] This is a subtle, but important, shift in the representation of Siddons's earlier London appearance because it emphasises the idea of Siddons's natural talent, which would become integral to her subsequent public image.

Over the next year Siddons's name appeared more frequently in the London news, sometimes copied from the Bath press and other times specially written, with her later success foregrounded with frequent panegyrics to encourage interest. As a result, the media reception that awaited Siddons in London in 1782 was a complete reversal to that she had received in 1775. In June 1781, a review of her as Isabella (the role she would later play in London) claimed she 'delighted her audience even to agony'.[85] On 10 January 1782, the *Public Advertiser* announced her to be 'without a Puff, the second Actress of the Age; commencing that Age with the Century, at the Year 1750; including, therefore, Cibber and Pritchard, as well as Younge and Barry': high praise for an actress who had yet to be successful in London. The vagueness – is it Younge or Barry who is the first actress of the age? – enables them to praise Siddons without provoking the ire of the others.

Only one doubt persisted: 'Dramaticus' wrote in the *London Courant* (2 February 1782) that 'Mrs Siddons is excellent in tragedy' but harboured one doubt: 'lest her voice should prove too weak for your theatres'. By the time Siddons appeared again in London the newspapers had set out the expected and appropriate response. One newspaper claimed: **'**We have seen this Lady in the country, and can promise to the public, that in a very extensive walk of the drama,

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[83] *Morning Chronicle,* 26 June 1781; *Morning Chronicle,* 29 August 1781; *Gazetteer,* 17 September 1781; *Morning Chronicle,* 24 November 1781; *London Courant,* 13 February 1782; *London Packet,* 23-25 Janaury 1782; *London Courant,* 22 March 1782; *Morning Chronicle*, 26 June 1781.
[84] *Morning Herald*, 7 December 1780. Further praise of Siddons in the Bath company appeared in the *Morning Chronicle,* 19 April 1781 and *London Courant*, 20 April 1781.
[85] *Morning Chronicle,* 19 June 1781.

her talents, if properly cherished, will afford them sensible delight'.[86]

A notable change in her media presentation was in respect to her itinerant family. The newspapers appear to re-present her strolling history as a dynastic heritage. Theatrical families had long had cultural power: earlier in the century the Cibbers had dominated the London stage. In February 1782 the papers, anticipating Siddons's return, printed the following:

> Mrs. Siddons, the Actress of Bath, may be considered as having Stage Talents by *Inheritance:* Her Grandfather was "old Ward," as he was called, a well-known Country Manager; her parents were both players; and their progeny to the number of thirteen, of whom are Mrs. Siddons and Kemble at Dublin, are all at this time wearing the sock and buskin.[87]

Re-consideration, or re-presentation, of her family history continued following her return to London. The *Morning Herald* (22 October 1782) published a variation on the previous paragraph: 'Mrs. Siddons and Mr. Kemble [her brother, John Philip] may be pronounced players by *inheritance*; their mother was the daughter of old Ward, a well-known itinerant Manager'. *Parker's General Advertiser* (29 October 1782) published a more detailed biography: 'THIS Lady may be literally said to have been born upon the stage. Her father, Mr. Roger Kemble, (now Manager of one of the most considerable country Companies of Comedians in England) is descended from a respectable family'. It continues by detailing other personal information concomitant with the public's interest in personal histories of public figures.

The shift from anonymous 'theatrical nurseries' alluded to in 1775 to the presentation of a theatrical dynasty served to confer authority on Siddons, rather than the usual presentation of strollers as inferior to their London counterparts. The subsequent success of her brother John Phillip Kemble (playing in Dublin during the 1782/83 season) seemed to support this idea of a

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[86] *Parker's General Advertiser,* 11 October 1782.
[87] *Public Advertiser*, 20 February 1782; *Morning Chronicle,* 21 February 1782.

powerful theatrical inheritance, although the cool reception in London to her sisters Elizabeth and Frances in early 1783 prompted the following response in the *Morning Herald* (24 February 1783): 'indeed it would diminish Mrs. Siddons's claim to praise, if it could be said her talents were derived from a family stock, and an heritage she possessed in common with her kindred'. The sense of strolling troupes of families perhaps helped to sanitise their reputation. Siddons certainly used her role as a mother to justify her professional work as maternal duty to provide for her children.[88] The net beneficiaries of the family connection were, of course, the other Kembles. No doubt, however, the shift in emphasis from a strolling troupe to a theatrical dynasty from whom Siddons was the prime inheritor of talent, aided her public profile too.

Siddons was not only imagined in terms of her family, but also as part of the tradition of the theatrical class. In September 1782, just a few weeks before her return, the *Public Advertiser* (17 September 1782) reminded readers of the low origins of various subsequently successful players:

> Some of the greatest Theatrical Performers have begun, as is usual in other Arts, from small Beginnings; thus Colley Cibber played for Ten Shillings a Week; Mrs. Pritchard figured at Bartholomew Fair; Quin was the original Lieutenant of the Tower in the altered Richard the Third, &c. &c. – Thus also Mrs. Siddons, who is now announced as the Cibber Rediviva of of [sic] Drury Lane, was in 1776, when she played the Runaway, Lady Ann, &c. with Mr. Garrick, not at all prophetic of those prodigious Powers she is said to have have [sic] at present.

Here Siddons is positioned alongside fellow players (male as well as female) as a part of the theatrical tradition. The comparison with Susannah Cibber was familiar; prior to her London engagement, the *London Courant* (6 October 1781) piqued interest in her by claiming that 'The

[88] Siddons's famous 'three reasons' speech delivered during her final performances at Bath and Bristol were her children. See Brooks, *Playing Women*, pp. 135-39.

friends of Mrs. Siddons, the Bath actress, do not hesitate to compare her, in *pathetic* energy, to the late Mrs. Cibber'. This view was confirmed following her return in the *Public Advertiser* (10 October 1782): '[Siddons's] ability in producing a Shew of Pathos, is placed, by the Critics who have lately seen her, next to Mrs. Cibber'. Invoking Cibber immediately placed Siddons in a particular 'walk' – that is as a leading tragedienne. The print 'buzz', to return to Sherman's description, anticipating Siddons's return to London conditioned her phenomenal success. She was already cast alongside leading ladies of the past.

Siddons's theatrical pedigree, as well as comparisons with former leading players, puffed Siddons in advance of her return. This intensified following her appearance. One correspondent compared Siddons favourably with French counterparts: 'having had an opportunity of seeing *M. Gauchin, Clairon, and Demusnil*, the female Tragedians most celebrated in this century, he thinks their dramatic abilities inferior to those of Mrs. Siddons'.[89] As well as presenting Siddons as a leading star, this writer also anticipates later uses of Siddons as a national figurehead: in Siddons the English stage could rival the French.

But Siddons was not only compared to female greats. A correspondent in the *Morning Post* (5 December 1782), for example, said she 'unites the genius of Garrick and Cibber'. Then, on 16 December 1782, that same paper invoked yet another comparison between her and Garrick. Reviewing her first London benefit, in which she played Belvidera in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682), the critic claimed that since Garrick 'closed his dramatic life, we never beheld such a splendid auditory as filled this theatre'. In doing so, they made Siddons a natural heir to the theatrical crown, one previously adorning a male head.

The newspapers became fascinated with the wider Kemble family: 'No less than eight is the number of the *Kemble fraternity*–now the comedians and tragediennes errant, of the different cities, &c. throughout England–but hereafter, probably, at no great interval of time, to

[89] *Morning Post*, 16 Oct 1782.

bring up the rear of Mrs. Siddons on the London stage'.[90] This family of players captured the public imagination; this is suggested by 'errant' which doubles as meaning both 'lawless' and 'travelling adventurer' (as in Knight errant), the latter loaded with ideas of chivalry and Englishness. Siddons's success was no doubt a help to her siblings, but other than John Philip, they were not particularly praised on the London stage, though some played significant roles in the regional theatre scene.[91] The least successful, Ann Hatton (formerly Curtis), worked (unsuccessfully) as a writer. Judith Pascoe has written about Hatton's complex relationship with her sister, but it suffices here to say that Siddons's success could not ensure the success of her siblings, but they were keen to emphasise their consanguinity.[92] The title page of Hatton's poetry volume, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1783), specifies that she is the 'sister of Mrs. Siddons', in a clear attempt to capitalize on her sister's newfound success.[93]

There were some detractors: in December 1783, over a year after her return to the capital, *The Rambler's Magazine* published a graphic satire entitled *The Thespian Congress, or the Siddonses of the Barn*. Though it does not depict Siddons, the title nonetheless references her and alludes to her itinerancy, invoking the kinds of stereotypical 'stroller' image discussed earlier, and suggests that though largely Siddons's strolling history was repackaged positively as theatrical dynasty, it could also still be used as a weapon to undercut the Siddonian supremacy.

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[90] *Morning Chronicle*, 22 April 1783.
[91] See Fitzgerald.
[92] Judith Pascoe, 'Ann Hatton's Celebrity Pursuits', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850,* ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 245-63.
[93] Ann Hatton [Curtis], *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (London: Millan and Raf [sic], 1783). In the 'Address to the Public' she claims that worries 'too much will be expected of her' as Siddons's sister (p. v).



Figure 2 *The Thespian Congress, or the Siddonses of the Barn* (BMSat 6734), December 1783, etching on paper, 11 × 176 cm, © Trustees of the British Museum.

By and large, however, her theatrical family became an asset rather than a liability. Transforming the Kemble family into a kind of theatrical dynasty became a useful means of sanitising her provincial, strolling history. At the close of the London season, when Siddons returned to the provinces to act at summer venues, it was no longer strolling, but rather a kind of summer tour. Though itinerancy remained somewhat socially ambiguous, the London press presented the 'Summer peregrinations' of the winter players favourably, without the derision associated with ordinary strollers.[94] Siddons was also cited as a reason to view country players more sympathetically; consider, for instance, this review in the *Morning Post* (7 September 1784):

> *Miss Cleland acts Lady Teazle* in the comedy last mentioned, better than might be imagined from her performances in Covent-Garden. It is a remark, indeed, that must have occurred to every one conversant with the stage, that there is nothing like a country

[94] *Public Advertiser,* 9 June 1783.

> playhouse to call forth the latent abilities of performers. Those who despise, or affect to despise them, should recollect, that it was in this school *Mrs. Siddons* herself was educated.

By 1784, with an explicit nod to Siddons, a London newspaper is extolling the value of provincial theatre – if only as a source (or, 'school') for later leading players.

If the above lines seem exaggerated in praise, then that is simply symptomatic of the kinds of press coverage Siddons received following her reappearance. Her name appeared in the papers almost daily; reviews, gossip, playbills, and poetry were all regular features. Particular attention was paid to her popularity with the royal family and the aristocracy; newspapers named-dropped fashionable attendees at Siddons's performances, such as the Duchess of Devonshire, and reported on Siddons's invitations to private events. Everything related to Siddons became news; even if it told readers very little about her, it contributed to the sense of her being ubiquitous in fashionable life.

Such intense coverage did not go unnoticed. On 22 October 1782, a few weeks after Siddons's return, retired Catherine 'Kitty' Clive wrote the following to actress Jane Pope:

> I think of Mrs Siddons greatness exactly as you do as nither [sic] of us has seen her; I know what the phrenzy of [a] new performer (who has been properly puff'd before she was seen) will do with the publick; but they will not like her Half so well in her second part, tho perhaps she may act it better; there is nothing so uncertain as the continuance of admiration to a new performer.[95]

Clive's letter reveals an awareness of both the vicissitudes of public favour and the role of the 'puff' in presenting a player to the public. Though Clive does not witness Siddons's acting for several months, her letters show a particular interest in this new actress whose press attention signals unprecedented success. Indeed, she wryly comments in a later letter on 12 December 1782 that 'Mrs Siddons is not one of us, for it seems she is [better] than any body ever was;

[95] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS.Toynbee B.1, Letters to Jane Pope, fols.31-52.

but I must see that before I [believe] it' – an impression that would certainly be gleaned from the encomiums in the press.[96] Then, on 21 January 1783, after seeing Siddons's benefit the previous month, Clive wrote again:

> Is it possible you shou'd be in want of what to say when you had such meteor [playing?] in your eyes and indeed in every body's eye, for I never heard of anything like the admiration that every body is struck with that have seen her; nay indeed the people who have not seen her Praise her as much as those who have (that's Comical).[97]

Clive does not linger on her opinion of Siddons's performance; one senses some sarcasm at describing her as a 'meteor', playing on the burgeoning trope of the 'star' player.[98] Clive's letters show intense fascination with Siddons, she even asks Pope five questions and will await her response 'with impatience'.[99] Clive, whose career spanned several decades, establishes that the response to Siddons is new, and not even predicated on seeing her perform.

Newspapers and magazines drove much of Siddons's newfound success, particularly the public hysteria for her. Unlike her previous London season, this time Siddons filled the newspapers. Though clearly the intense press coverage enabled her to achieve unprecedented success, in doing so Siddons ceded some control over her identity to the press. Once her character was in the public domain, it was subject to interpretation, revision, re-creation that was beyond her control. Despite frequent mentions of 'the Siddons' in the press, newspapers actually present multiple, disparate Siddonses, as well as those versions of the self, performed by her on and off-stage. The effect of this is to close the cognitive gap between the real physical Siddons and the print encounters the public could have with her. Newspaper accounts of

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[96] MS.Toynbee B.1, fols.31-52.
[97] MS.Toynbee B.1, fols.31-52.
[98] According to the *OED* the sense of 'star player' appeared from the early nineteenth century, developing out of a mid-eighteenth century trope of likening leading players to stars, 'star, n', *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189081?rskey=rWjRxa&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed: 19 July 2018]
[99] MS.Toynbee B.1, fols.31-52.

Siddons fictionalise her as a character in a drama that played out in the pages of the London press.

With this idea of a mixed-media culture in mind, William Warner's concept of a 'media-event', which he discusses in terms of the publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), usefully frames how we might understand Siddons's re-emergence onto the London stage:

> First, such an event is not precipitated by some prior historical event (such as a battle, a trial, or a coronation) which then becomes grist for representations in the media. Instead, it begins with a media production in this case, the publication of *Pamela*. Second, the atavistic interest in the media event, as demonstrated by purchases and enthusiastic critical response, feeds upon itself, producing a sense that this media event has become an ambient, pervasive phenomenon which properly compels the attention and opinions of those with a modicum of "curiosity". Finally, this media event triggers repetitions and simulations, and becomes the focus of critical commentary and interpretation […] I suggest we consider the media event as a type of event rather than a simulation of one, and as such it should be interpreted on two registers: as a symptom of changes working within the avid consumers of the event, and as something that carries genuine effects into culture.[100]

Siddons's return to London *was* a media event, beyond simply the media responding to her return. The enormous growth in her popularity, and the increasing proliferation of print materials relating to her, are testament to the way in which the media attention 'feeds upon itself'. It is possible, therefore, to assess Siddons's success not (solely) through her performances but as a form of 'print entertainment' that was staged in the periodical press.

Siddons swiftly became a fiction in print, or indeed many fictions. The kind of parts she played (she-tragedy heroines such as Isabella, Belvidera, Calista) were often implicit throughout these verbal depictions of her; such as lofty language and an emphasis on the passions. Sometimes these depictions correspond with the kind of image that Siddons self-

[100] William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 178-79.

directed, but on other occasions correspondents criticised her.

The newspaper was central for the public to interact with Siddons – and for the Siddonian drama to play out in public. Readers actively engaged with the periodical press, not only by contributing letters, but also by asking for content; for example, the opening essay 'To Our Correspondents' to the *Lady's Magazine* in March 1783 states 'Our Correspondents who so eagerly solicited a print of Mrs. Siddons, will find their request liberally gratified in this Month's Magazine'.[101] Included was a copper plate of 'an elegant Pattern for a Hand-screen of Mrs. Siddons in the Grecian Daughter', capitalising on the demand for Siddonian paraphernalia – a demand both encouraged and enabled by the press. The *Public Advertiser* (30 April 1783) demanded Siddons perform again in the *Grecian Daughter* because 'the Public have a Right to be gratified by at least a second Representation'. Here the paper appears to be a mouthpiece for the public, but it might also be a canny puff inserted to drum up demand for a second appearance in the role.

The language used to describe Siddons in the newspapers was not necessarily unique to her; 'inimitable', 'celebrated', and 'admirable' were (ironically) frequently used about several players. There is, however, an unprecedented volume of material on 'the Siddons'. Superlatives frequently appear in reviews of Siddons's acting; the *London Courant* (17 December 1782) commended her appearances as Isabella, Euphrasia and Jane Shore as the 'highest pitch of theatrical merit' but having seen her as Belvidera proposed that 'perhaps the stage never knew a finer piece of acting'. All aspects of her performances were praised, even her voice. The *Morning Post* (14 October 1782), for example, pronounced her voice as Isabella as 'enriched with a variety of tones properly suited to the different gradations of passion'. That same paper reported that her Calista, in Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703), was greeted

[101] *The Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to their Use and Amusement*, vol. 14 (March 1783) [n.p.].

by an enthusiastic audience: 'the language of the boxes uniformly ran thus, "We never beheld such a scene before".[102] Whatever the realities of Siddons's performances and audiences, the verbal impression is one of unprecedented hype; if you read the papers you could not attend the theatre without expecting something new and extraordinary. The *Morning Post* (16 December 1782) claimed that 'such a constellation of accomplishments were probably never before exhibited in the dramatic world'. A star was born.

BACKLASH

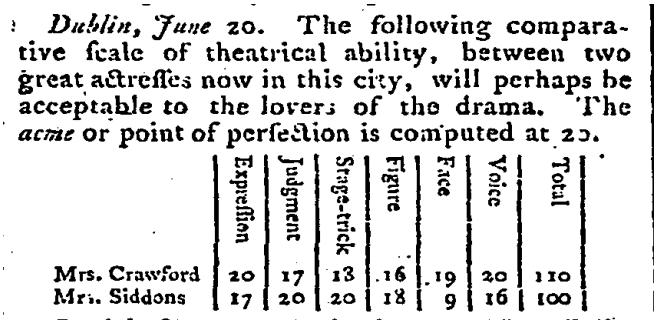
The press was not uniformly admiring. One method of discrediting Siddons was to remind readers of her former failure. In February 1783 the *Rambler's Magazine* printed 'The THEATRICAL RIVALS BEING A COLLOQUY, OR GREEN-ROOM, CHIT-CHAT *Between Mrs. Y—es and Miss Y—ge*' a fictional conversation between actresses Mary Ann Yates and Elizabeth Younge. Younge tries to console Yates who is in tears over the success of Siddons.[103] The imagined scene describes Siddons's extraordinary achievements to which Younge exclaims: 'What a fuss here is about a woman who the other day was hissed off the stage, and was glad to be a mute in a procession'. Recalling Siddons's earlier failure undermines the sense of her natural talent that was touted in other presses. Younge tells Yates that Siddons's success is simply 'by dint of puffing'. The imagined scene further attests to the use of public figures as kind of fictional characters: there is no real rivalry reported here, but by using them as mouthpieces for Siddonian detraction it creates the sense that there was a real rivalry.

Negative press had some benefit by contributing to the general buzz about her; it certainly did not prevent her securing parts. One reason for this was that fellow tragedienne

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[102] *Morning Post,* 5 December 1782.
[103] *The Rambler's Magazine; or the Annals of Gallantry, Glee Pleasure and the Bon Ton,* 8 vols (London: 1783-1790), I, p.70-71.

Ann Crawford was conveniently absent from London in 1782/83 due to disputes with managers and was engaged instead at the Crow Street Theatre in Dublin. Despite playing in different cities, the press constructed a rivalry between the two women. Several lengthy encomiums of Crawford were published; for example, the *Morning Chronicle* (10 January 1783) printed a lengthy poem within a letter by 'Utrinque Justus', which puffs Crawford in the guise of 'CANDID ADVICE' for Siddons.[104] Comparisons continued throughout the season and when Siddons appeared in Dublin in June 1783, a scale comparing their tragic capabilities was published in which Crawford was the winner.[105]



Dublin, June 20. The following comparative ſcale of theatrical ability, between two great actreſſes now in this city, will perhaps be acceptable to the lovers of the drama. The *acme* or point of perfection is computed at 20.

	Expreſſion	Judgment	Stage-trick	Figure	Face	Voice	Total
Mrs. Crawford	20	17	13	16	19	20	110
Mrs. Siddons	17	20	20	18	9	16	100

Figure 3 'Scale of Theatrical Ability', *Morning Herald*, 3 July 1783 © 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers [Gale]

Other actresses were deemed superior too. For example, when Elizabeth Younge played Portia in December 1782, the *Public Advertiser* (4 December) not only declared it 'never performed better' but also reminded readers that 'she who *was* Mrs Siddons' had also played the part, though like others 'not so well' as Younge. As well as presenting Siddons as inferior to Younge, it had the added benefit of reminding readers of Siddons's former failure. Others took aim not at her acting, but at her fashionable status; when the newspapers repeated on Siddons's appointment as 'Reading Preceptress to the Princess' the *London Courant* (24 January 1783) sarcastically asked 'Are they intended *for the stage?*'. The tone here suggests that Siddons's success, particularly with the royal family, had dangerous, almost levelling, potential. The joke

[104] *Morning Chronicle,* 10 January 1783.
[105] Also published in the *Gazetteer*, 3 July 1783.

was on them: Siddons would go on to show that actresses could be queens (of a kind). As William Hazlitt, thirty years later, would put it: 'the homage she has received is greater than that which is paid to Queens'.[106]

Most newspapers printed conflicting responses to Siddons; the *Morning Post* was overwhelmingly complimentary, whilst *Parker's General Advertiser* led the negative press. This not only included the claim that Calista was 'not Siddons's forte' and that Mary Ann Yates and Ann Crawford were 'very far superior', but also the more damning (though perhaps correct) assessment that 'to her own merit, she owes much; but to the tide of fashionable fancy she stands much more indebted'.[107] This is not an unreasonable reading; the newspapers were filled with details of royalty and aristocracy who repeatedly attended Siddons's performances and apparently raised money for her. Reports of her close association with fashionable society functioned as kind of 'symbolic capital' and served to increase the general public's interest in her.

It was a running joke that the London press was biased; for example, a Dublin correspondent in the *Parker's General Advertiser* (3 July 1783) mockingly referred to the 'repeated panegyricks [sic] in the impartial London news papers'. Accusing Siddons of orchestrating the bulk of press coverage undermines her claim to genuine success. If anything, however, the mixed press served to increase her profile; indeed, the 'contradictory accounts' likely heightened anticipation in Dublin, as audiences eagerly awaited making a decision for themselves.

There were downsides to praise too: on 3 April, *Parker's General Advertiser* declared 'Mrs. Siddons begins to lose her theatrical popularity very much [...] Had the puffs been less sparing, the merit would have claimed longer attention'. Herein lies the most repeated criticism

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[106] William Hazlitt, 'Mrs Siddons', in *The Fight and Other Writings,* ed. by Tom Paulin and David Chandler (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 48-50 (p. 48).
[107] *Parker's General Advertiser*, 24 March 1783.

of Siddons throughout her first season; not of her stage performances but rather her print performances, with much speculation from critics that her 'friends' had a hand in them. As I have demonstrated, inserting puffs was not uncommon, and readers were not naive – it was understood that papers were filled with puffs paid for by those with vested interests (though identifying those people is difficult to trace).

The sense that puffs might do more harm than good was repeated in several newspapers; the *Morning Herald* (17 January 1783) suggested they caused the 'highest mischief' to Siddons and on 4 February 1783 reminded readers of the vicissitudes of public favour: 'the town are so entirely bewitched with her [Siddons] powers, as were a short time with those of Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Yates'. The *London Courant* (4 February 1783) implored her 'friends [...] to lay a side the *puff enormous*' (a play on the categories for fame Mr. Puff outlines in *The Critic*). Critiques of puff culture were often only puffs in disguise: the *Morning Herald* (7 February) complained against the 'innumerable puff-paragraphs' that appeared for Frances Abington and Siddons. However, this appears to be an elaborate set up to puff for Elizabeth Younge. The writer declares it 'very remarkable' that none appears for her, which he suggests is 'proof of her modesty' and then goes on to say that she 'not confined to one line of acting'; something which distinguishers her, the reader is meant to infer, from Siddons's 'tragic walk' and Abington's 'comic walk'.

Puffs were a form of entertainment in themselves, they did not need to be believed to be enjoyed: staging rivalries in the pages of the press was mutually beneficial to players and papers. That said, *Parker's General Advertiser* (22 October 1782) gave the following warning: 'Mrs. Siddons has merit, it is allowed, and enough has been said about it in the papers perhaps at present. Her friends will do well to rest it here; for it is possible the expectations of the audience may be raised so high, that eventually she may suffer in their opinion'. The sheer volume of press attention – good or bad – transformed the possibilities for star players to

become public celebrities.

The media hype resulted in unprecedented public notice – what the *Public Advertiser* (23 January 1783) termed the 'Siddons rage' – and unequivocal success. The *Rambler's Magazine* (February 1783) sarcastically reported on the spread of Siddons's influence: 'The polite world are now so *Siddoniz'd* that she not only plays to overflowing houses, but gives the *Ton* in dress to all the polite world; and no mantua-maker or milliner is now employed who has not studied to cut and make ever branch their profession *a la Siddonne*'.[108]

The strongest evidence for the peculiarity of the public's reaction comes from those who did not share it. Horace Walpole wrote of his relative indifference to Siddons compared to others in fashionable society:

> I cannot think Mrs Siddons the greatest prodigy that ever appeared, nor go to see her act the same part every week and cry my eyes out every time. Were I five and twenty, I suppose I should weep myself blind, for she is a fine actress, and fashion would make me think a brilliant what now seems to be only a very good rose diamond'.[109]

What Walpole accounts for as simply his old age is proved untrue by comments made by young Frances Burney: 'I must confess my admiration of Mrs. Siddons does not keep pace with that of the Town; yet I think her a pleasing and elegant Actress'.[110] Neither Walpole nor Burney dislike Siddons's acting, but their more moderate responses are at odds with reports of extreme fascination.

Burney's private reflections on Siddons – and the Siddons hype – in a letter to her sister in January 1783 illustrate her concern at publicly admitting her measured opinion of Siddons:

> I answered in guarded terms, that I admired her very much. And this is constantly my answer, &, while it goes no further, is very true.

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[108] *The Rambler's Magazine*, vol. 1 (February 1783), p.80.
[109] Letter to Rev. William Mason, c.21 January 1783, Horace Walpole, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. by W. S. Lewis, 48 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983), XXIX, p. 282.
[110] Frances Burney, *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney: Volume V, 1782-1783*, ed. by Lars E. Troide and Stewart J. Cooke (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press), p. 209.

> For the World would I not have any critique of mine run about the Town in her disfavour. She is certainly by far the *best* Actress we have, & as to her not fulfilling all *my* ideas, nobody, after Garrick, I suppose ever could.[111]

Even in fiction, characters are wary of critiquing Siddons; in the anonymously written novel *Seymour Castle* (1789), Cecilia writes in a letter her favourable opinion of Crawford over Siddons, to which she adds, 'as you value my future fame do not show this to any one, for to attempt to criticise the child of nature, as she's called, would be to expose my ignorance and want of taste'.[112] Clearly there was felt to be some kind of social risk by admitting dislike of Siddons.

Even George III appears to have been swept up in the 'rage'; Burney records in her journal a conversation she had with the King about newspapers and players, during which the King confessed his admiration of Siddons: '"I am an *Enthusiast* for her, cried the King, quite an Enthusiast; I think there was never *any* player, in my time, so excellent, not Garrick himself; —I own it!—"'.[113] The religious connotations of 'enthusiasm' are significant; Siddons inspired reactions similar to that of zealotry (enthusiasm and Methodism had strong links in the eighteenth-century), which accords with recent celebrity theorists' thesis that celebrity replaced, or at least rivalled, old forms of social and cultural authority.[114] A writer for the *Morning Post* (14 October 1782) encouraged this kind of response to Siddons from almost immediately following her return to Drury Lane, writing 'we feel ourselves actuated by a kind of enthusiasm, in mentioning the superlative merit of Mrs. Siddons; for we boldly venture to affirm, that no age, and country, ever produced a more eminent actress'. Superlatives aside, there is an incendiary quality to this statement; like Methodist preachers, Siddons was criticised

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[111] Ibid., p. 200.
[112] *Seymour Castle, or the History of Julia & Cecilia*, 2 vols (London: H.D. Symonds, 1789), II, pp. 27-28.
[113] Frances Burney, *Additional Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, ed. by Stuart J. Cooke and Elaine Bander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), I, *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199658114.book.1>, p. 353.
[114] Roach, *It*, p. 1-2; Rojek, p. 13-14.

for whipping up a frenzy in the public that was potentially disruptive to social order.

The press swiftly coined a phrase, 'Siddons mania', to describe the unprecedented scale of Siddons's popularity. Although the term is frequently cited in scholarship on Siddons, its currency and valence remain under-explored. Whilst it does usefully denote the breadth of Siddons's popularity, it also contributes to the creation of the idea of the 'pathological' fan, and with it the implications of 'mania' that are often overlooked.[115] Though 'Siddons mania' is used often as a shorthand to map historical celebrity onto modern fan practices, there is no work investigating the origins, or the perhaps surprising usage, of the term. In practice, 'Siddons mania' actually appears only a handful of times in contemporary newspapers and, when it is, its usage is pejorative.

Heather McPherson uses the anachronistic term 'Garrickomania', in order to explain 'Garrick's cult-like following and the enthusiasm he elicited'.[116] Such elision is unhelpful: it de-contextualises the historical specificity of 'Siddons mania', ignores its implications for gender, and disregards its emergence as a media construct. That is not to say that there were not comparable effusions of admiration for Garrick; in *Evelina* (1778) Burney's eponymous heroine 'almost wished to have jumped up on the stage and joined' Garrick [as Ranger] in *The Suspicious Husband*.[117] But it is important that the press did not label the behaviours of Garrick's audience as a 'mania' – and nor have I found evidence for 'Jordan mania', 'Henderson mania' nor 'Kemble mania'. 'Mania' appears to be a term reserved for Siddons and distinguishes Siddonian audiences from that of her contemporaries and predecessors. The term 'mania' is important. Though the *OED* shows that 'mania' as a term for madness was in usage

[115] K. O. Ferris, 'Through a Glass, Darkly: The Dynamics of Fan-Celebrity Encounters', *Symbolic Interatoon* 24 (2001), 25-47; John Fiske, 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom', in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media,* ed. by Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 9-29; Cheryl Wanko, 'Patron or Patronised?: 'Fans' and the Eighteenth-Century English Stage', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850,* ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 209-26.
[116] Heather McPherson, 'Garrickomania: Garrick's Image', *David Garrick: A Theatrical Life*, Folger Shakespeare Library [n.d.] <https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Garrickomania:_Garrick%27s_Image> [accessed 17 November 2016]
[117] Burney, *Evelina*, p. 28.

from the twelfth century, the first usage of 'obsessive enthusiasm for a particular thing' appears in 1776 in the *Annual Register* (lottery mania).[118] Other kinds of mania followed; in 1784, for instance, the *Gazetteer* (20 April 1784) reported upon 'electioneering mania'. Theatrical mania, however, seems to first be used in relation to Siddons.

By the time it warranted a term of its own, 'Siddons mania', was apparently over. The first usage I have found is in the *Morning Chronicle* (7 April 1783) in which the writer precipitously claims, 'the Siddons *mania* is certainly over'. This is notable not only because Siddons's career lasted for another three decades, but also because the first pointed usage of 'Siddons mania' appears to mark its end. That said, a few months earlier, on 25 January, a correspondent for that same paper declared 'Everything in England is a mania, or it is nothing' before complaining that 'the English mania at present is, that an actress is the first of human characters, and she and her children are to become national concerns'.

A month later the *Whitehall Evening Post* (22-25 February 1783) mocks this further by joking that when Siddons's son Henry turns twenty-one, he 'is to be created a Duke, and a blue ribband, and a large pension on account of his mother's services to the public in tragedy, *Ha! ha! ha! ha!*'. The satirical tone here is underscored by very real concerns about the potential social disruption that fame could engender. Rather than a positive appellation, 'Siddons mania', was invoked by the press to shape and police audience behaviours. Moreover, the concept of 'Siddons mania' tells us much more about her audiences than it does her.

Attention to the audience was nothing new; reviewers had long praised the 'brilliant and crowded' audiences of the period. But Siddons appears to have caused unprecedented reactions in her audiences due to her 'affecting' performance style. The descriptions of Siddonian audiences fall into two categories; the 'crowd' scenes and reports of individual

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[118] 'mania, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113459?rskey=53zLsh&result=1&isAdvanced=false> [accessed 8 December 2018].

reactions. The crowds Siddons attracted were a concern; the *Morning Post* (22 January 1783) reported 'A military gentleman […] was bruised exceedingly by the crowd', and on another occasion the *Whitehall Evening Post* (12-15 April 1783) reported that it was so busy that the crowd were 'so near suffocation'. The verbal reports are supported by visual images. Siddons's effect on audiences is depicted in George M. Woodward's drawing *Sidonian [sic] Visages or The working up of the Passions* whilst an even less flattering representation of the crowd as mob is presented in *The Pit Door. La Porte du Parterre* (1784).



Figure 4 George M. Woodward, *Sidonian [sic] Visages or The working up of the Passions* (D5459/1/56), c.1780s, coloured drawing on paper, 250 × 190 mm © Derbyshire Record Office



Figure 5 After Robert Dighton, *The Pit Door. La Porte du Parterre*, 9 November 1784, hand-coloured mezzotint on paper, 350 × 249 mm © Trustees of the British Museum.

Siddons does not feature in either picture, although she is named in the title of one print and on a playbill in the other; in effect, she 'ghosts' each image and appears, as she does in the newspapers, through text. In the *Sidonian Visages*, Woodward draws attention to the extreme reactions to Siddons's performances: we see the sombre crowd fainting, crying, applauding and one figure appears to be drinking. At first the image might appear to be quite conventional; the actions and sad mien typically associated with the cult of sensibility, but it was Siddons whose performances were specifically linked to this kind of behaviour. It is unclear whether it was

created before or after Siddons's triumphant return to London, but as the title clearly suggests, there was a particular kind of response to Siddons that was recognised as unique and distinguished her (and her audiences) from others.

The Pit Door depicts a crowd in disarray; hats and shoes strewn across the floor, and people, pushing, pick pocketing, vomiting and fainting. This image is the first of its kind to depict such a clamouring to get into the auditorium. It expresses a longstanding collective anxiety about mob culture. The 'mob' is motivated by a desire to see Siddons in *The Grecian Daughter* (signalled by the playbill). The crowds' action is therefore linked in particular to the celebrity culture Siddons inspired – a visual representation of the 'mania' that she was said to prompt. Though exaggerated, it reflects the contemporary reports of scenes at the theatre when Siddons played.

Comic exaggeration obviously plays a central part of verbal and visual satire, but we find similar depictions in private correspondence. In 1786, Sophie von La Roche, a German visitor to London, recalled:

> there was no way of moving forward once on the large stairway; people swayed to and fro as though balanced on the waves, until those above had gained a footing. One eminent gentleman offered my noble friend his arm, and conducted us finally to our destination. I was amused to see what a rabid curiosity and lust for pleasure can do in a mob; but heaven preserve me from having a second such experience.[119]

La Roche's comments echo that of Anne Seward who said, 'I saw her [Siddons] for the first time, at the hazard of my life, by struggling through the terrible, fierce, madding crowds into the pit'.[120] Hester Lynch Piozzi similarly described 'such a Crowd! I confess myself frighted, as I had no Taste to crush my Limbs into Fractures & Cancers'.[121] These descriptions affirm

[119] Sophie von La Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie V. La Roche*, ed. by Clare Williams (London: J. Cape, 1933), p. 218.
[120] Qtd. in Booth, Bassnett, and Stokes, p. 18.
[121] Qtd. in Burney, *The Early Journals V*, p.211n94.

the reports in the newspapers, though of course, the newspaper reports might have shaped their expectations and representations.

Amabel Hume-Campbell writes a more measured description, albeit still busy, of the auditorium:

> I could get no other Place but that Nook of a slip which is certainly a bad One. I could make Shift to see behind the Post, but one certainly does not hear or see there to Perfection […] what is worse I am convinced that the Managers have done wrong by throwing back the Stage, & that Mrs. Siddons is like a fine high-finish'd Picture that should be seen pretty near. – I wish somebody or other would abuse the Managers in the News-papers for their Eagerness to gain more Places at the Expense of half the Audience.[122]

As well as providing further evidence for the crowds that Siddons attracted, Hume-Campbell's comment shows engagement with the way that the newspapers crowded around her figure.

Hume-Campbell's suggestion that the newspapers be the site for publicly criticising the managers echoes a common criticism of the papers, an example of which is found in the *Public Advertiser* (30 April 1783) in which 'a correspondent observes, that as it is difficult to reach the Ear of a Manager any othe [sic] Way than through the Speaking-Trumpet of a News paper, this Mode of Address becomes not only warrantable but necessary'. News editors benefitted from publishing these kinds of letters as its asserts their cultural power as mediator between the public and the managers.

Whether or not the crowds were as extreme as some of these correspondents suggests the personal correspondences certainly add to the sense of Siddons's unprecedented success and these writers add their voice to the mania. In fact, such representations might be said to play into the hands of managers as they suggest a sense of urgency for getting a place in the auditorium. Whilst no doubt exaggeration played its part, it is worth asking too whether the

[122] Bedford, Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service, Lucas Archive, L30/9/60/292.

constant presentation of extreme audiences in the press encouraged audiences to behave in this way or promoted a language to describe audiences that was appropriated in private writing.

Let us turn to the implications of 'mania' then. First, it signals some kind of mental illness. Although we should be careful not to overestimate the phenomena of 'Siddons mania' it is significant that the behaviour of audiences to her warranted a new kind of terminology. When modern scholars refer to 'Siddons mania' it has been to denote a kind of fan frenzy, without paying attention to the negative associations which have had long-lasting implications for fan culture. The subsequent pathologizing of fandom is no surprise when we consider that some of its earliest iterations were, as Celestine Woo points out, branded a 'condition'.[123] Mania suggests a set of behaviours associated with mental disorder, and fits with our modern sense that fan culture is irrational (to the point of subversive). Although the word is associated with mental disorder, it was also conceived as a kind of physical contagion: in 1788 the *Morning Chronicle* reported that the Dublin audience was 'under the influence of Hughes Influenza which is as universally catching as the Siddons's [sic] mania'.[124] The repeated emphasis on this mania casts the intense fascination with Siddons (and any other actress) as a social infection; yet despite this, recent critics often elide the negative implications, who simply use the term to denote Siddons's unprecedented widespread appeal.

Whereas the crowd scenes play into longstanding anxieties about mob culture and the potency of theatrical performance, the newspapers were more attentive to the individual responses of members of the audience to Siddons's performances. These are the actions of those who the *Public Advertiser* (24 March 1783) describes as the 'professed Siddons maniacs'. With the exception of Charles James Fox who reportedly wept at Siddons's performances

[123] Celestine Woo, *Romantic Actors and Bardolatry: Performing Shakespeare from Garrick to Kean* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 123.
[124] *Morning Chronicle*, 14 May 1788. Refers to actress Maria Hughes who debuted at the Crow Street Theatre, Dublin on 10 April 1788 as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter*.

(becoming a running joke in the papers), the majority of these 'maniacs' appear to be women.[125] On seeing Siddons's Calista one lady 'fainted away, and was carried out of the box in strong hysterics', and following a performance of *Jane Shore* 'two young ladies in the boxes fainted in the last scene, and at the same moment, a young girl in the first gallery shrieked out, and went into hysterics'.[126] Fainting and hysterics were strongly associated with the cult of sensibility with which Siddons became associated. The newspapers were able to present Siddons as this figure of sensibility by using the audience as 'proof'.

These depictions correspond with the stereotype of the cult of sensibility in which women were the most extreme performers of its effects; it is women who occupy the boxes, and wealthy ones at that, but according to the *Morning Post* (14 April 1783) during a performance of *The Grecian Daughter* 'even the critics [sic] seat and galleries exhibited the most striking instances of sensibility'. There is a class distinction implied here in terms of sensibility; the 'critics' as professionals (or even workers) do not ordinarily have that sensibility of those in the boxes, and nor do those in the cheaper gallery seats. The 'striking instances of sensibility' of those who are usually immune are a further testament to Siddons's powers.

Other commentators were more sceptical. Following a performance of *Jane Shore*, the *Public Advertiser* (11 March 1783) describes an 'as usual, overflowing and Woe-begone' audience, and 'as usual also, a Lady in one of the Side Boxes, seemed to be conceiving –a Fainting Fit –But she slipped her Calf, and the Miscarriage passed not without Laughter'. The writer expresses doubt about the sincerity of such reactions; here, the woman 'seemed to be conceiving' which suggests some kind of performance act. This is not unlikely, for the newspaper reports had normalised such behaviour, and perhaps set expectations. Though a funny anecdote, there is a more significant undercurrent at play; the maternal language

[125] On Fox's tears, see *Morning Post*, 17 December 1782; *Parker's General Advertiser*, 7 January 1783; *Morning Herald*, 14 January 1783.
[126] *Gazetteer*, 15 January 1783; *Morning Herald,* 3 February 1783.

('conceiving', 'miscarriage') used again emphasises the femininity associated with this mania, but something corrupted – excessive sensibility is not a sign of femininity but evidence of its reverse.[127]

At the close of the season *Parker's General Advertiser* (12 May 1783) recommended that after 'so many faintings, hysterics, &c. Having happened lately during the too-powerful and affecting exertions of Mrs. Siddons, it is necessary for that lady's admirers, or, in other words, every body, to relax and recruit their spirits before they again venture to stand her attack upon the heart'. Though the interest in Siddons remained high, and she enjoyed a long, successful career, reports of 'Siddons-mania' decreased after her first season. However, the language used in the periodical press did transfer into other written forms, which had a powerful effect on the perceived reception of Siddons.

Newspaper language may have informed the way that Siddons's acting was described in personal correspondence. A 'fan' letter, for example, written to Siddons in 1784 by a group of Scottish gentlemen, refers to 'her inimitable talents'.[128] More surprising is that the intensity of witnessing Siddons perform – and the language used to describe it – had currency long after the madness of 1782/83 ceased. Consider the following letter, written in 1796, from a young woman to her father, about her recent visit to the theatre:

> Dear Papa,
> I am almost crazy with Dear Divine Angelic Mrs. Siddons, last night is beyond every thing that ever was, or ever will be the play Isabella (Fatal Marriage I mean) you see I am cracked: her screams, two falls flat upon her face are too dreadful–as well as the madness with which she ends the play. She cried in reality much and the Child (Miss Cummins) was terrified & wept most bitterly nothing will cure me but seeing her every night which I intend to do. to-night I go with pretty Mrs. Hunter (the Play The Distressed Mother) tomorrow I am in hopes is Belvedere. Saturday Grecian Daughter & Mrs. S. Also acts in the farce. Mama told you about our seeing

[127] For motherhood and actresses see Engel and McGirr ed. *Stage Mothers*.
[128] London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Sarah Siddons (Folder 1), 29 Dec 1775 - 14 Dec 1811, THM/14/19/SS1, 'Letter to Siddons from Edinburgh 9 June 1784', <Adam Matthew Digital Eighteenth-Century Drama> [accessed 18 August 2017]

> her in Court, when her countenance during the Trial was almost like seeing her upon the stage, her smile is bewitching & in short if I dont [sic] hear her speak in a Private Room (which Betsey & I are determined to do) I shall be miserable–Uncle W. says he had no idea she was so great beyond all imagination he says she terrified him out of his senses . . . Excuse more as Mrs. Siddons prevents me from writing so adieu from Your Dutiful [—].[129]

'Crazy', 'cracked' and without a 'cure' except in seeing Siddons in performance again; the writer expresses the kind of mania associated with fans. This panegyric about Siddons typifies the kind of effusive praise we expect to see in fan writing (superlatives and exaggeration). We see here a fascination not only with her onstage performances but glimpses of her in public life; though she (and her 'mama') conflates that stage world and the real world: Siddons is always on display. The determination to see her close-up in a 'Private Room' (in which Siddons gave readings) suggests a desire for a more intimate encounter than is possible in the theatre. The 'Trial' likely refers to the impeachment of Warren Hastings, which had concluded the year before (reaching a not guilty verdict) and had been a large legal drama, which had been widely reported in the press.[130] Though the term 'Siddons mania' was no longer in vogue in 1796, the language used to describe Siddons's performance early in her career still had currency in private correspondence and in discussions of her non-theatrical appearances. This letter evinces the longstanding impact of periodical writing on private expression. The Siddonian idiom that emerged in the periodical press in 1782 provided a framework for audiences to understand and relate their experience of Siddons.

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[129] Sarah Siddons (Folder 1), 29 Dec 1775 - 14 Dec 1811, THM/14/19/SS1, 'A "Fan" Letter', <Adam Matthew Digital Eighteenth-Century Drama> [accessed 18 August 2017]. This letter was published in *The Times* (26 September 1938) by Gabrielle Enthoven, of the Victoria and Albert Museum, as an example of an early "fan letter", from a manuscript letter recently added to the V&A collection.

[130] O'Quinn, *Staging*, p. 168-171.

CREATIVE COMMENTARIES

Straightforward reviews and gossip paragraphs were not the only kind of Siddonian texts that appeared in periodicals. They were also a platform for creative responses, particularly poetry, which could be serious, reflective, satirical or simply in response to current affairs. Many poems on or about Siddons were presented as from the perspective of an audience member. We cannot be sure which were 'genuine' – if any – submissions from the public. However, as Corin Throsby discusses, early 'fans' were 'powerful and highly active participants in cultural production […] defined by their productive rather than consumptive capabilities'.[131] Even if poetry submissions were planted, presenting the authors as members of the public creates the sense that the public played a vital role.

Poetry was a common feature of newspapers and magazines, and all kinds of public person had poems written about them (players, politicians, royalty). As with other forms of writing, the sheer volume of material about Siddons also distinguishes her treatment from that of her contemporaries. On a basic level the poems add to the sense of Siddons as a pervasive presence in the news. I am concerned here with poetry printed in the periodical press, which contributed to the diurnal saturation of Siddons in the public imagination, but she was also the subject or dedicatee of a number of poems published in a number of single-author collections.[132]

Some poems were printed in monthly magazines, such as 'To Mrs Siddons, on seeing her in the part of Isabella' (*Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, November 1782) and 'On Seeing Mrs. Siddons in Jane Shore' (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, November 1782). Unlike magazines, which were repositories for more substantial critical and creative writing,

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[131] Throsby, p. 277.
[132] Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, *Verses Addressed to Mrs. Siddons, on Her Being Engaged at the Theatre-Royal, Drury-Lane, in 1782.* (London: T. Cadell, 1782); Helen Maria Williams, 'Sonnet, To Mrs. Siddons', in *Poems*, 2 vols (1791), II, pp.23-24.

newspapers were crammed with advertisements, gossip paragraph, reviews, news. Poems on or about Siddons were therefore in dialogue, or at least read alongside, other newspaper items. For example, one poem '*On the Man of the People crying at Mrs. Siddons's performance*' (*Morning Post*, 22 January 1783) responded to reports of Charles James Fox's emotional reaction to a recent performance.

All kinds of poems were printed, particularly intensely in the first few years, especially the first season.[133] Many of the poems drew on the metaphors, language and content found in other Siddonian news and were, of course, read alongside them. In these creative fantasies, however, Siddons almost disappears behind her parts: her itinerancy and strolling family are seldom invoked. 'To Mrs. Siddons' by 'J.F.', printed in the *Whitehall Evening Post* (21-24 December 1782), is a typical example; it praises 'matchless Siddons' and refers to specific, especially moving, performances. The writer, overwhelmed by Siddons, desires to know:

> Whence drawn that fund of passion's lore,
> Which wins my soul in *Isabel*,
> And bids it weep with humbled *Shore*?
>
> (l.6-8)

If the reviews are imbued with a sense of authority, then the poems register personal reactions.

Several are 'reaction' poems, which profess to have been written in response to seeing Siddons perform as a sign of the significant emotional effect she has on them. The poems evince the power of Siddons's performances; she appears to have had an overwhelming effect on her audiences, inspiring a kind of a sublime experience.[134] The *Morning Chronicle* (31 December 1782), for instance, printed 'To Mrs. Siddons, on seeing her in Jane Shore', which opens almost like a poetic review:

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[133] In addition to the poems discussed below, others include a 'Siddons' acrostic by 'W. L. H', printed in the *Morning Chronicle* (24 October 1782); 'On Mrs. Siddons' by A. Bicknell was published in *The European Magazine*, vol. 4 (November 1783), p. 390; an extract of Mr. Stockdale's 'Siddons' to promote the book in *Public Advertiser* (19 April 1784).

[134] See Rosenthal.

> Hail, charming fair! whose graceful air and mein
> With sacred awe invok'd the Tragic scene;
> In hapless *Shore*, such strokes of grief display'd,
> That Nature wept, yet lent her genial aid
> To charm the aged, the wise, the grave, the young,
> With accents soft almost divinely sung;
>
> (l.1-6)

Siddons had first appeared in London as Jane Shore on 8 November. The *Morning Chronicle* (9 November 1782) praised her 'natural feeling' and 'pure sensibility' and proclaimed her a '*great actress*'. Here the speaker is 'transported' by Siddons's performance: a recurrent theme in poems addressed to her. Despite the lofty language the poem is essentially a puff; the speaker describes her as 'the Sov'reign heroine of dramatic laws' (l.8), anticipating a career-long association with Queens, hopes that she will thrive, 'Long may you boast the mirror of the stage, / And captivate the critics of the age' (l.11-12), and that she will 'Imbibe a Crawford, or a Yates's praise' (l.14). In the initial *Morning Chronicle* (9 November 1782) review of Siddons's Jane Shore, the writer claimed that Siddons 'united all the dignity of Mrs. Yates's elocution, with all the softness of Mrs. Crawford's expression of sorrow'. The lines not only recall earlier comparisons but are also intensified by a lengthy letter in the next column that discusses 'the comparative excellence of Mrs. Siddons's and Mrs. Crawford's theatrical talents'. The poems, then, do not standalone, but rather participate in the discursive world around Siddons created by the press. It is worth noting too that it appeared above a poem addressed to William Pitt, thereby associating the actress's fame with that of a senior politician.

A similar kind of poem, 'On Seeing Mrs. Siddons in the character of Belvidera', written, apparently, 'by the author of the Tragic Muse' (William Russell), again appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* (14 March 1783). It is a somewhat unusual, however, because the speaker is not simply 'transported', but also desires physical closeness:

> Make me, ye Gods! but Jaffier for an hour,
> And on this head your sharpest vengeance shower;
> Let me, like him, be troubled and distress'd,

> Make but my pillow Belvidera's breast!
> Her kiss ecstatic will my peace restore,
> And I [shall?] ruin welcome and adore.
> My tortured heart let her send arms entwine,
> And keenest anguish will be bliss divine!
>
> (l.1-8)

Though many of these 'on seeing' poems are characterised by the speaker's excess of emotion, this is unusual in the desire to *be* the hero opposite Siddons's Belvidera. The closeness desired by the speaker breaches the distance sought in Siddons's virtuous self-presentation. But the speaker frames his desire as one for physical closeness with the character, rather than the off-stage actress.

Occasionally there were poetic exchanges. In the *Morning Chronicle* (10 January 1783) a contributor signed 'Merlin' condemns the attention to Siddons, particularly from political leaders: 'SIDDONS, to see king, lords, and Commons run, / Glad to forget, that Britain is undone' (l.1-2). The speaker mocks the behaviour of audiences, which was much reported in the press:

> Each youth cries "charming," and each maid "divine."
> See, of false tears a copious torrent flows,
> But not one real, for their countries woes
>
> (l.8-10)

The poem ends:

> Run on, mad nation! Pleasure's frantic round,
> For acting, fiddling, dancing be renown'd
> Soon Foreign fleets shale [rale?] the Western main:
> George fill no throne but that of Drury Lane.
>
> (l.15-18)

Merlin's comments anticipate later criticism of celebrity, particularly the notion that it is a politically expedient distraction from more important concerns.

"T.S" responded to Merlin in the *Morning Chronicle* (13 January 1783) by asking "And shal' not Britain's Monarch share / His freedom with the free?', to which Merlin replied with

a lengthy poem that begins:

> THE soul of sympathy, the eye of woe,
> The plaintive tongue that bids the heart o'erflow,
> Pathos, that makes fictitious sorrows true,
> I feel, and yield the palm to Siddons due.
> Yet, with contempt, I view th' attendant throng,
> The rage of pleasure, and the lust of song[135]
>
> (l.1-6)

We see in these poems that the figure of Siddons had come to embody broader national concerns, the criticisms of celebrity culture, as well as providing material for poetry in the press as an entertaining dialogue. Siddons's identification with the nation would reach its zenith in 1789, when she performed Robert Merry's 'Ode on the Restoration of His Majesty', following George III's recovery from illness, dressed as Britannia.[136]

Merlin returned to his poetry, 'To Mrs. Siddons', which he published over two further numbers (*Morning Chronicle*, 4 February and 24 March 1783). He begins with an assurance to Siddons that 'envy' does not lead him to 'write thee down', but rather that he is 'fond of celebrity' and must, as 'Poets are starved', turn to her as a topic. Merlin's self-acknowledged use of Siddons to further his own career reveals the dissonance between the real Siddons and her potential as a quasi-fictional character – co-opted for the purposes of others. Merlin's poems were advertised in advance of publication, which implies that the poetry of this kind was popular or at least the potential popularity of its subject would increase the readership.[137]

Though less frequent, poetic responses to Siddons in the newspapers continued throughout her career.[138] Most famously, perhaps, is 'No. VIII' of *Sonnets on Eminent*

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[135] *Morning Chronicle*, 17 January 1783.
[136] Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality*, pp. 83-84.
[137] Merlin's poem 'to Mrs. Siddons' was republished in the *Westminster Magazine*, vol. 11 (April 1783), pp. 212-13).
[138] Examples include '*On Mrs.* Siddons, and *Mrs.* Abbington's *offers to play on the Night of* Henderson's *Family, at Covent-Garden*' (*Morning Chronicle,* 20 February 1786); '*The* CABINET *of* THESPIS' (*Morning Chronicle,* 7 November 1786); 'On Mrs. *SIDDONS*'s acting' (*Morning Chronicle,* 30 November 1787); '*Ode to Mrs. Siddons*' (*The World and Fashionable Advertiser,* 12 January 1788); E.B, 'To Mrs. SIDDONS, ON HER READING THE TRAGEDY OF JANE SHORE TO A PRIVATE PARTY AT HARROGATE, Oct. 22, 1791' (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 61 (December 1791), p. 1142); Anna Seward, "To Mrs. Siddons" (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 70

Characters written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (with Charles Lamb) and published in the *Morning Chronicle* on 29 December 1794.[139] Coleridge places himself at the centre of this poem. It begins with the poet drawing a comparison between the playgoer and a child:

> As when a Child, on some long Winter's night,
> Affrighted, clinging to its Grandame's knees,
> With eager wond'ring and perturb'd delight
> Listens dark tales of fearful strange decrees.
> (l.1-4)

The opening simile that infantilises the speaker emphasises the effect of Siddons on him; she casts her 'necromantic spell' over him illustrating her by-then legendary powers. The ending, 'E'en such the shiv'ring joys thy tones impart;– / E'en so though, SIDDONS! meltest my sad heart!', recalls earlier poems we have seen in which the speaker admits the effect of Siddons's performance on them. It is due largely to Coleridge's later popularity that this poem has been remembered. Nevertheless it is notable that Siddons is the only woman who features in the series, not unlike her special status by comparison with other actresses in that she was often compared to male actors.[140] Like most of these poems, it is not the poem's merit, but its participation in a news culture increasingly saturated with verbal depictions of Siddons, which influenced the public's perception of her. So too, though the notional subject of these poems is Siddons, they really showcase the importance of the individual viewer and the role the public played in construction of public identities. The 'Siddons' of these poems is a fictional construct, appearing alongside other 'fictions' about her throughout the press.

(December 1800), p.1185); Miss Grimani, 'TO MRS. SIDDONS, ON HER LAST APPEARANCE ON THE STAGE' (*The Lady's Monthly Museum*, vol. 15 (June 1822), p.350-51).

[139] The series ran December 1794-January 1795.

[140] Other 'Eminent Characters' were Richard Sheridan, William Godwin and Edmund Burke.

NOVELISTIC IMPRESSIONS

Another genre, which appears to have borrowed from the periodical, is the novel. What follows expands upon the idea of Siddons as a fictional character by assessing her appearances in novels. Rather than claim that novelists simply borrowed from newspaper writers or vice versa, it is more productive to remember the traffic between literary forms during this period. Not only did authors (and readers) cross the porous boundaries between literary forms, but the periodical 'hosted' novels or novellas in various ways including publishing serials, advertisements, extracts, reviews.

As outlined in the previous chapter, players frequently appeared in novels in part due to what Gillian Russell describes as the 'reality effect', grounding novels in facts about the metropolis at a particular moment.[141] Siddons's cameos outstrip them all; she features in several novels in 1780s and 1790s when the protagonist (often female) attends the theatre. Traces of 'newspaper Siddons' ghost many of these novelistic impressions. One reason for this similitude, I suggest, is that whilst most of the reading public in the country would not have seen her perform, many might have been familiar with the verbal depictions of her that featured in the press.

Some novels showcase the role of newspapers in theatregoing. In *The False Friends* (1785) Sophia Richingford writes 'I read very high encomiums of Siddons in the newspapers' and in *Helena* (1788) the heroine reads the papers which 'announced' Siddons's upcoming performance as Belvidera, and is 'eager to behold this greatly and justly admired actress'.[142] Others draw upon the language of familiar press accounts to set the scene; for example, the 'intolerably crowded' theatre, the 'difficulty' in getting a box, or to announce a fashionable

[141] Russell, 'The Novel and the Stage', p. 512 and 522.
[142] *The False Friends*, 2 vols (London: J. Barker, 1785), I, p. 60; *Helena*, (London: W. Richardson, 1788), p. 30.

audience; in Charlotte Lennox's *Hermione, or the Orphan Sisters* (1791) 'all the world will be there' to see Siddons as Belvidera.[143] These depictions do not necessarily prove the author's familiarity with play going (though I do not claim otherwise), but rather a familiarity with the motifs, conventions and language of theatregoing as presented in the press.

Siddons is often imagined in her roles as Isabella, Jane Shore and Belvidera, and described by common platitudes found in the press such as 'inimitable', 'immortal', 'celebrated' and 'incomparable'. The description of Siddons's Belvidera in Lennox's *Hermione* also evokes typical reviews: 'the inimitable Mrs. Siddons surpasses all that can either be conceived or described. Added to the most exquisite taste and feeling, she possesses a countenance most expressive, over which she enjoys a command the most inconceivable'.[144] The superlatives here echo the kinds of exaggerated praise we have seen in the newspapers. The sudden tonal shift, an abandonment of the narrative briefly in order to emulate a kind of theatrical review, draws further attention to the specific newspaper style.

More often the interest lies in the reaction of the heroine to Siddons, as an index to character, particularly female sensibility. In Margaret Holford's *Fanny* (1785) the heroine 'deservedly admires' Siddons's 'inimitable' performance as Isabella, and reveals her sensibility by declaring 'I hope I shall never again be so much affected by imaginary woe'.[145] Unsurprisingly in Mrs. Thomson's *Excessive Sensibility* (1785) the heroine Julia reports 'high expectations' of the 'incomparable' Siddons as Belvidera, asserting that 'we ought all to pay our adoration to her, as she raises the sex'.[146] Such panegyrics could be taken from a newspaper report, as could the scenes at the playhouse, in which 'in the middle of the fourth act, having shed abundance of tears, her Ladyship's sensibility was wound up too high by the inimitable

[143] Charlotte Lennox, *Hermione, or the Orphan Sisters*, 4 vols (London: William Lane, at the Minerva Press, 1791), I, p. 266.
[144] Ibid., II, p. 24.
[145] Margaret Holford, *Fanny*, 3 vols (London: W. Richardson, 1785), I, p. 255.
[146] [Anna(?)] Thomson (Mrs.), *Excessive Sensibility; or, the History of Lady St. Laurence* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1787), I, p. 164.

Siddons, and she fainted away'.[147] There are several other examples; including *Oswald Castle, or Memories of Lady Sophia Woodville* (1788) in which Siddons's opening speech as Lady Randolph in *Douglas* 'so entirely attracted every tender emotion of Sophia's heart'; and in *Helena* (1788) the eponymous heroine's 'feelings [...] were wrought up to agony' by Siddons's Belvidera.[148]

Female sensibility could be an attractive signifier, as in *The False Friends* (1785) in which the 'lively and affected sensibility' that Miss Watson 'betrayed at the sight of Mrs. Siddons in *Jane Shore*' makes her 'at first sight' very attractive to the Earl of Wallbrook.[149] Though the majority of the protagonists are women, in Thomas Holcroft's *Hugh Trevor* (1794-97) the hero attends the theatre for the first time and sees Siddons as Calista in *The Fair Penitent* (1702).[150] His response to her performance, 'To describe the effects produced on me by Mrs. Siddons is wholly impossible', typifies the impression we find in many novels which call attention to what was perceived as Siddons's uniquely affective powers.[151] Trevor later goes on to the see the 'inimitable Mrs. Jordan' who 'for one moment made me all her own'.[152]

Sometimes the choice of play has particular implications for the plot. For example, in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; Or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1797), the heroine sees Siddons as Calista, anticipating her own later infidelity.[153] In *Montrose or the Gothic Ruin* (1799) the pregnant Marchioness is 'deranged' by the 'inimitable Siddons' as Isabella – perhaps unsurprisingly given Isabella's sacrifice for her son.[154]

The heroines are often drawn to Siddons, sometimes in a superficial way (to signify her

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[147] Ibid., p. 236.
[148] *Oswald Castle, or Memoirs of Lady Sophia Woodville*, 2 vols (London: T. Hookham, 1788), I, p. 202; *Helena*, p. 31.
[149] *The False Friends*, II, p. 42.
[150] Holcroft, *Hugh Trevor*, pp. 105-07.
[151] Ibid., p. 106.
[152] Ibid., p. 142.
[153] Wollstonecraft, p. 128. Lisa Crafton Plummer discusses Wollstonecraft's use of Siddons and Calista in Crafton, pp. 17-33.
[154] *Montrose, or the Gothic Ruin*, 3 vols (London: R. Dutton, 1799), III, p. 73.

sensibility), or to foreshadow plot, or in a kind of licensed (and limited) same-sex attraction (permissible perhaps due to Siddons's virtuous reputation); the theatre is a rite of passage space signalling the heroine's entry into the world. Her response to the play (and players) is almost practice for real-life emotional responses. The narratives of 'theatre scenes' operate on two levels; the first is the 'zoomed out' description of the public space in which the heroine is on show (perhaps even for her future lover); the second, is a kind of 'close up' in which the other characters fade out and the reader is privy to the heroine's personal response (often transformative or at least in awe, and considerably more so than others). This somewhat echoes the form of a theatrical review, which often provides an overview of the play and the evening, before turning to individual cast members.

Not all novels uniformly admire Siddons; some draw upon the reports of rivalry between her and Crawford that had had much currency in 1782-84. In *Seymour Castle, or the History of Julia and Cecilia* (1789), Cecilia writes to Julia about seeing Siddons as Belvidera.[155] Her description of Siddons's 'more terrifying than distressing' performance that 'wants that softness, that gentleness of manner, that harmony of voice, that Crawford possesses in so eminent a degree' replicates the kind of comparisons made in the press earlier in the decade.[156] This novel was written long after the Crawford-Siddons rivalry had ceased to be of public interest. By the mid-1780s Crawford was performing primarily in the provinces, very much in Siddons's shadow, and the papers no longer paid attention to their supposed rivalry. Referring to old news, however, serves to locate the novel at a particular historical moment, and also suggests the durability of verbal representations found in the papers.

Despite her renowned touring and her strolling history that dominated the early press, most novels introduce Siddons in London. One exception is Catherine Hutton's epistolary

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[155] *Seymour Castle*, II, p.27-28. Jane Purbeck and Elizabeth Purbeck, *Raynsford Park*, 4 vols (London: G. Kearsley, 1790) includes a debate on the relative merits of Siddons and Crawford (II, p. 24).
[156] *Seymour Castle*, p. 27.

novel *Oakwood House: An Original Novel*, which was serialised in John Bell's *La Belle Assemblée* magazine between 1811 and 1813. In Letter XXIX, published in August 1812, just two months following Siddons retirement, Jane Oakwood tells of a recently-arrived 'company of comedians', which repeat upon longstanding stereotypes of strolling troupes: 'their theatre, as you may suppose, a barn, and their curtain a blanket'.[157] Following a discussion on the relative merits and failings of itinerant players, Jane Oakwood 'saw *The School for Scandal* when it first came out' and remembers seeing Siddons both 'at a country theatre [...] before she was known to fame' and in her heyday when 'it was the fashion to faint at her performances'.[158] Unlike the other narratives discussed above, Oakwood only *remembers* seeing Siddons in the past, she does not see her in the present. Gillian Hughes points out that *Oakwood House* was published 'at a time when the magazine was featuring a series of illustrated accounts of famous actresses'.[159] The blurred lines between fictional narratives and factual reports are therefore made manifest here.

Novelised Siddons epitomises the implications of being a *public* figure – your character is no longer your own, but a kind of fiction that can be used by all. She is not exactly fictionalised in these novels but provides a novelistic impression that would have been familiar to readers of the London press. Siddons is a plot device – a kind of prop – to provide psychological insight into the heroine. This might explain why she is almost always depicted on stage in a London venue, despite her frequent tours to provincial theatres, because she is only there to frame the heroine's experience and to signify that the heroine is participating in fashionable life.

The majority of novels in which Siddons appears were published between 1785 and

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[157] Catherine Hutton, *Oakwood House: An Original Novel,* in *La Belle Assemblée: or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, vol. 6 (August 1812), 72-75, (p. 72).
[158] Ibid.
[159] Gillian Hughes, 'Fiction in the Magazines', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Volume 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820,* ed. by Karen O'Brien and Peter Garside (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 461-477 (p. 475).

1795, though later novels evince the potential longevity of newspaper idiom. In Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1812), published a few months prior to Siddons's formal retirement from the stage, heroine Laura Montreville sees Siddons (this time as Mrs. Beverley in Edward Moore's 1753 tragedy *The Gamester*) during her first visit to a theatre, and again is overwhelmed by the experience: 'in the course of the two following days, Laura had sketched more than twenty heads of Mrs Siddons'.[160] Brunton's depiction of Siddons draws upon much earlier depictions of Siddons, because, by this point, she no longer received the same kind of praise. Siddons's reputation, made and maintained in print, outlived the realities of her performances. Despite frequent descriptions of newspapers as 'ephemeral' the repeated use of similar phrases and motifs resists ephemerality.

'She Was Tragedy Personified': From Celebrity to Posterity

Siddons officially retired from the stage in June 1812, following three decades of unprecedented success in London and beyond. Her final working years had been marred by personal tragedy, professional challenges, and the pitfalls of ageing. Death was not the end for 'the Siddons'; she has had what Lisa Plummer Crafton describes as an 'incredible theatrical afterlife'.[161] Her Lady Macbeth, for instance, was the standard by which others were judged until the close of the nineteenth century.[162] And she has remained visible through portraits, statues and, more recently, scholarly interest.

'Memory', argues Joseph Roach, 'is a process that depends crucially upon forgetting'.[163] It is clear that revisionist texts like memoirs, written with hindsight, overwrite the past to produce a particular kind of memory. Siddons's earliest biographies, James Boaden's

[160] Mary Brunton, *Self-Control* (London and New York: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 110.
[161] Crafton, p. 1.
[162] Duncan, pp. 61-62.
[163] Roach, *It*, p. 2.

Life of Mrs. Siddons (1827), Thomas Campbell's *Life of Mrs. Siddons* (1834), and her short 1831 manuscript *The Reminiscences of Sarah Kemble Siddons 1773-1786* (which Campbell apparently used as source material, but was not published until 1942), remember, invent and forget Siddons's past in order to create a coherent memory of 'the Siddons' that accords with the kind of ideas that were held about her around the end of her life. Whereas the later memoirs take for granted the primacy of the Kemble dynasty, news writing about her during her career created that possibility. Memoirs, in general, write over, or 'forget', the inconsistencies of the past and tell us more about how the subject should be remembered than the how they were.

Memoirs, in particular, work hard to counter the ephemerality of the player, whose art, unlike that of the painter or writer, vanishes. No surprise, then, that with the rise of the celebrity player came an interest in preserving their lives for posterity; biography. Writers, like Joseph Haslewood, were self-consciously participating in the creation of posthumous reputation:

> The curiosity of the next age to learn the Anecdotes of Siddons or Jordan, will probably equal the avidity with which the present explores the history of Booth or Betterton [...] We confess, therefore, a hope that the amusement and utility of of [sic] these Volumes will not be confined to the present moment; and we indulge an honest pride in contributing our *mite* to the treasures of British Biography'.[164]

I want to make the case here that the periodical press was engaged with the process of creating Siddons's posthumous reputation from the early days of her success. Though Stuart Sherman discusses Garrick's use of the press to shore up his posthumous reputation, critics have not considered whether Siddons was subject to a similar campaign.[165]

Richard Steele began a tradition with his eulogy to Thomas Betterton in *The Tatler* (No. 167, Thursday 4 May 1710) in which he declares: 'such an Actor as Mr. *Betterton* ought to be

[164] Haslewood, p. ix.
[165] Sherman, 'Garrick'.

recorded with the same Respect as *Roscius* among the *Romans*'; thereafter, the periodical press rushed out 'lives' on the death (or sometimes retirement) of a star player.[166] That is, not only did they advertise the biographical books and include extracts, but also they used the space in the papers to publish about players' lives too.

For Siddons, the earliest periodical biographies appeared not near her retirement or after her death, but immediately after her 1782 success. The *Morning Herald* (28 October 1782) printed "Anecdotes of Mrs. Siddons", subsequently reprinted in the *Whitehall Evening Post* (24-29 October). This short biography (a single paragraph), outlines the period just before Siddons's first London engagement until achieving enough 'wide-spreading fame' whilst at Bath to re-attract Drury Lane management. Though it mentions her early itinerancy, it excludes her work at Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and York following her first London season. It offers a sympathetic portrait of Siddons, for example, remembering that she was 'very warmly received' as Portia and blamed her subsequent failure on the 'indisposition of Mr. Garrick, and the crooked politics of that theatre'.

The account bears a striking resemblance to Siddons's 1831 *Reminiscences* in which, even though it is longer, she too omits her travels to the provincial venues prior to Bath, and blames Garrick's forthcoming retirement as well as the envy of fellow actress (what we might infer are the 'crooked politics' mentioned in the article) for her failure to be re-engaged the following season, casting herself as a 'victim' of management. Broadly speaking, however, the tone of these "Anecdotes" is similar to that of the *Reminiscences*, although the latter criticises Garrick's role more pointedly.[167] We can speculate as to whether Siddons inserted the piece (it certainly contains details not widely known, such as Lord Bruce initially recommending Siddons to Garrick, and Henry Bate's assessment of her after seeing her, on Garrick's behalf,

[166] Richard Steele, *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald Frederic Bond, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), II, *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198185338.book.1>, pp. 422-23.
[167] Siddons, pp. 4-6.

as Rosalind). Perhaps the original publication captured the public imagination early on in her career, became part of the Siddons myth and was subsequently used as a source for writing about her life. It is not insignificant that the *Morning Herald*, which first published this account, was founded and edited by Bate, who had initially arranged her Drury Lane engagement.

"Memoirs of the LIFE of MRS. SIDDONS' appeared in the *London Courant* (26 December 1782). It gives more details about her family, though mitigates the risks of itinerancy to reputation by claiming that her father, Roger Kemble, 'descended from a reputable family' and, again, omits her later travels to Manchester, Liverpool and York following her first London season. It does, however, detail her work in Cheltenham and Bath and even claims that her family's itinerant company performed in a 'stile very unusual in any other than a London stage'. The tentative discussion of her itinerancy evinces its ambiguous social status, whilst it also re-asserts London's authority. It gives extended detail about her initial move to London and her Bath career. It looks beyond her professional history, however, by discussing her early relationship with William Siddons, and her personal qualities. It describes her 'peculiarly pleasing' person, and presents her 'unblameable life, unsullied reputation and amiable manners of this deservedly favourite actress'. Many of the stories about Siddons that feature substantially in later biographies appear in this account including an unlikely story that Garrick met with Siddons prior to her Drury Lane engagement in 1775: a likely bogus story that continued to be rumoured in biographies into the twentieth century.[168]

The newspapers chronicled her daily life for almost three decades through speculation about her off-stage activities (invitations to galas and dinners, visits to her children) and speculation upon her upcoming engagements and salary. Speculation is a key word: in a letter to her friend Elizabeth Barrington née Adair on 26 February 1796, Siddons writes 'You will

[168] James Boaden repeats the claim (I, p.20-21), but her 'authorised' biographer Thomas Campbell refutes it: 'I have strong doubts with regard to this anecdote. The scene of it is laid in London; and I have heard Mrs. Siddons herself say, that she never was in London before her invitation from Garrick, in 1775' (I, p.65-66). Manvell follows Campbell (p.18).

perhaps see some [startling?] tale about my illness in the Papers but it is only a pain in my head and face which is more tiresome than dangerous you know'.[169] Of course, Siddons might be trying to allay her friends' fears, but it is worth repeating that the credibility of newspaper reports is difficult to ascertain: prone to exaggeration.

The attention Sarah Siddons garnered generated interest in other members of her acting family; anecdotes about her brother John Philip Kemble appeared shortly afterwards in *Parker's General Advertiser* (1 March 1783) and the *Morning Herald* (4 March 1783), even though he was yet to debut in London. The diurnal attention paid to Siddons in the periodical press can be read as her earliest biography.

Though these texts are often overlooked in discussions about actors' biographies they are an important source for the cultivation of celebrity identities, rather than simply culminations of that celebrity or retrospectives to secure posterity. Perhaps Siddons drew on newspaper accounts when writing her later *Reminiscences*; rather than the *Reminiscences* presenting an untold story, it re-presents a narrative that had been circulating since her early career, evincing the importance of early press coverage in subsequent acts of memorialisation.

Though these early texts have been overlooked, William Hazlitt's magisterial essay on 'Mrs. Siddons', which first appeared in Leigh Hunt's newspaper *The Examiner* (16 June 1816) has long been recognised as the apogee of Siddonian criticism in her lifetime. The essay participates in an ongoing cultural conversation on theatrical fame and celebrity that thrived throughout the long eighteenth century as Hazlitt laments Siddons's brief return to stage. For Hazlitt her return constituted nothing more than faded glory that risked damaging the public's memory of her.[170] Presumably it is print, he thinks, rather than performance, that should represent Siddons now. The essay offers at once panegyric on Siddons's wonder as a

[169] London, British Library, Barrington Letters Add MS 73737 (3/40). Reports of her illness in *Oracle*, 22 February 1796; *True Briton*, 22 February 1796; *Oracle*, 24 February 1796.

[170] Hazlitt, 'Mrs Siddons', pp.48-50.

tragedienne (once upon a time) and complaints against the poor substitute the present Siddons is for the 'memory' (whether a real one, or one conjured in the press) Hazlitt produces, intentionally or not, of 'Siddons': 'she was tragedy personified'.[171]

As work by Shearer West, Lisa Freeman and Heather McPherson discusses, Hazlitt's essay and other materials which try to bridge the gap between the aging Siddons and the myth of 'the Siddons' are fraught with problems, not least because they articulate a misogynist desire to see a woman exit the stage when she is no longer desirable.[172] Hazlitt's memorialisation is not authorised; Siddons, after all, wants to perform. Their consideration of the ways in which Siddons's aging body was mediated to the public through portraits, memoirs and essays, invites illumination through Marvin Carlson's ideas of ghosting. Critic Lisa Freeman has explored the 'palimpsest of memories' created by Siddons's performances over the decades and concludes that her ageing body resulted in a 'painful kind of cognitive dissonance' for viewers.[173] Physical discrepancies were not as problematic as they might be today – pregnant Juliets and elderly young lovers were not uncommon due to the tradition of role ownership. Nevertheless, the gulf between Siddons at the height of her powers and Siddons in old age was enormous. The audience must, Shearer West suggests, see the ageing Siddons 'through a kind of double vision' in order to 'reconcile or elide any inconsistencies'.[174]

But whilst this work usefully points out the ways in which an actress is mediated to the public through various media (only age, it seems, enables scholars even today to cede the idea of agency), their attention to materials produced near the end of Siddons's career misses the point: the process of mediating 'inconsistencies' and 'dissonance' between expectations and

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[171] Hazlitt, 'Mrs Siddons', p. 48.
[172] Shearer West, 'Siddons, Celebrity and Regality: Portraiture and the Body of the Aging Actress', in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000,* ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 191-213 (p. 192); Lisa A. Freeman, 'Mourning the "Dignity of the Siddonian Form"', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction,* 27 (2015), 597-629 (p. 607); McPherson, 'Siddons Rediviva', p. 126.
[173] Freeman, 'Mourning the "Dignity of the Siddonian Form"', p. 607.
[174] West, 'Siddons, Celebrity and Regality', p. 192.

realities of ‘the Siddons’ were there in periodicals from the start. Moreover, the acts of memorialisation by Hazlitt and others serve both to preserve an idea of Siddons, but also to present those who produce them as cultural authorities. Through writing on Siddons, and other famous figures, Hazlitt secured his own fame, an ironic outcome, given Claire Brock’s claim that he privileged contemporary success over posthumous recognition.[175]

Hazlitt has received disproportionate attention for his role in creating a long-lasting impression of Siddons. Yet he built upon the work of editors, correspondents and contributors of periodicals from the 1770s. The Siddonian idiom they created was, after all, the reason that those in the early 1800s had a conception of ‘the Siddons’ in the first place, which was apparently compromised by her ageing body. It was the periodical press that created a consistent Siddonian image that shaped, policed and navigated readers’ expectations from the start of her triumphant career at Drury Lane from 1782. In short, it is in the papers that we find Siddons’s legacy created for her contemporaries.

[175] Brock, pp. 168-75.

CHAPTER 4: CREDITING MISS FARREN: A 'VALUABLE' ACQUISITION TO THE STAGE

Elizabeth Farren [Farran] (c.1759/62–1829) was born in Liverpool to Irish actor George Farran (formerly an apprentice surgeon-apothecary) and his wife Margaret Wright.[1] Following her father's early death she too appeared on the stage, though we know little of her early career. We do know that by 1774 Farren was established as an actress in Liverpool and Manchester, under manager Thomas Younger, before moving to London in 1777. Over the next twenty years she established herself as a leading comic actress, specialising in 'polite lady' parts. She became just as well known, however, for her relationship with the Earl of Derby, whom she married in 1797 following the death of his estranged first wife, Elizabeth Hamilton.

Farren's print celebrity does not quite match Siddons's; she does not, for instance, appear in novels as Siddons does and is the subject of fewer poems. Nevertheless, her press coverage remains an especially rich archive, not only in terms of theatrical reviews but also, far more than Siddons, for its speculation and documentation of her private life. Compared with Siddons, and her comic contemporaries Frances Abington, Dora Jordan and Mary Robinson, Farren has received little notice in contemporary scholarship, with the exception of one (flawed) biography and cameos in surveys of eighteenth-century actresses.[2] In part, I suggest, this is due to Farren's lack of posthumous fame. In many ways this makes her celebrity all the more potent for analysis: unlike Siddons, for example, she was unconcerned late in her career to secure her identity as a 'Queen' in a particular genre (for Farren, Comedy) for posterity, because she took on a new role, in her own lifetime, as the Countess of Derby.

This chapter addresses two main concerns. The first examines the role of the press in

[1] Peter Thompson, 'Farren [Farran], Elizabeth (1759x1762-1829)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online], <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9191>. According to the *True Briton* (10 April 1797), Farren's surname on her marriage license was spelt differently to that which she used professionally.
[2] Suzanne Bloxam, *Walpole's Queen of Comedy: Elizabeth Farren, Countess of Derby* (Ashford, Kent: S. Bloxam, 1988).

Farren's rise to become a leading comic actress, where she specialised in 'polite lady' roles. The second considers the staging of her private life in the press, particularly her relationship with the Earl of Derby and her friendship with the 'Richmond House set'. I close by examining the press reaction to her exit from the stage and re-emergence in public life as a Countess.

We have seen in the last chapter that Siddons's history of itinerancy and her theatrical family was a recurrent feature in her press coverage. Her public image was grounded by her identity as a Kemble with dynastic links to theatrical tradition, which served to bolster her reputation as a figure of national importance. By contrast, Farren's background was rarely commented upon because her family were less significant to British theatrical culture (though some did act). Instead, her press coverage, much like the plays she starred in, was very much concerned with her present stage career, rather than her family legacy. As a consequence, Farren's publicity paid close attention instead to her status as a contemporary icon (rather than national figurehead).

Two themes recur in Farren's press coverage in particular; the first is her natural affinity with the role of the 'lady', and second, is her value and cupidity. The language of reviews often involves financial metaphors and commentary on her value to the stage, whilst gossip about her relationship with Derby frequently turned on its monetary benefits. Though press accusations of Siddons's avarice are well-known, these reports were based on a presumed masculinity about her professional work, which she attempted to neutralise through her performances of motherhood.[3] By contrast, I suggest that, the cupidity associated with Farren drew not upon her heavy work schedule, but rather her performances in comedies, in which the plots frequently turn on monetary concerns, as well as her off-stage mirroring of those fashionable characters.

Central to my analysis, then, is the blurred line between player and part on the

[3] Brooks, *Playing Women*, pp. 133-44; McPherson, *Art and Celebrity*, pp. 129-30.

eighteenth-century stage. As Lisa Freeman observes, audiences were 'persistently encouraged to draw associations between those private lives and the roles players played'.[4] I suggest that this is especially true for comic actresses. By contrast with tragedies, which are traditionally set abroad or set in the past and claim to explore universal themes, comedies offer a reflection of contemporary society, humorously exposing its foibles both to entertain and improve. Comedies commonly turn upon the financial stakes of marriage (both before and during it), often led by a female player whose financial status drives the plot and registers the persistent anxieties about women and money.

Importantly for actresses, the principal female role is often a leader of fashionable life. She serves as an index to taste, commercial activity and manners: the actress who plays her must both reflect and reinvent the fashions. On stage, Farren embodied a type of person who was visible in the boxes to other audience members. Knowledge of Farren's off-stage participation in those fashionable circles would have informed the reception of her performances of polite, fashionable ladies. Let us now turn to the kinds of value ascribed to Farren following her London debut at the Haymarket in 1777.

BECOMING A QUEEN OF COMEDY

A significant feature of eighteenth-century theatrical criticism draws upon a language of 'credit' and 'value'. Debut performers, for instance, were assessed upon their potential 'value' to the London stage; successful ones might be described as 'valuable acquisitions' or at least 'credit' given to their attempt. Other more tangible economic concerns feature too; salaries, ticket sales, benefit night takings and production costs were all discussed or speculated upon.

In her study of 'visual and verbal representations' of players, Shearer West notes the

[4] Freeman, *Character's Theater*, p. 39.

'tendency' in eighteenth-century theatrical criticism to review performances in terms of 'categorical division'; that is, addressing form, voice, expression, features in turn.[5] She suggests that these classifications could be used to identify not just good acting, but also those capable of recognising good acting through the knowledge of 'correct vocabulary'.[6] For our purposes here, we might also view such categories as an extension of financial metaphors; somewhat like assessing the qualities of a product, these categories serve to reinforce the audience's role as consumer and the player as an object.

The concept of 'value' and the assessment of players as objects to be consumed by the public has resonance for actresses in particular, not least because of the connotations with other sexually suspect means of earning money. James Peck discusses the introduction of a 'credit economy' over the long eighteenth century that is 'dangerously feminized' in the popular imagination.[7] He notes that the concepts of credit and risk in particular are figured as female, even though women themselves had little independent financial stake in the country, a theme which echoes through many dramatic representations of women and money, as well as the reviews of performances. When a player is described as an 'acquisition' or 'object' we are reminded of the player as a product, rather than a person. Moreover, the concept of credit is imbued with risk; to be 'in credit' means to be solvent, but credit is a volatile thing to earn and keep. A good performance might not be enough. With regard to press attention, the creditor here is the newspapers and its praise is not free: paragraphs were paid for.

Research by Felicity Nussbaum and Helen Brooks recuperates actresses' professional identities as 'economic agents', so often ignored.[8] Brooks shows that actresses' parts were, like property, of 'significant value', through which successful actresses established themselves as

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[5] West, *Image*, pp. 19-20.
[6] Ibid., p. 20.
[7] James Peck, 'Anne Oldfield's Lady Townly: Consumption, Credit, and the Whig Hegemony of the 1720s', *Theatre Journal,* 49 (1997), 397-416 (p. 412).
[8] Nussbaum, p. 18; Brooks, *Playing Women*, p. 17.

a ‘unique theatrical commodity’: that is, a one-of-a-kind product that secured their position.[9] Their work reminds us that money was not just a metaphor, but a material feature of players’ lives. The worth ascribed to them in the press had real economic implications; crediting an actress with a superior performance might secure employment and ensure income.

Rather than assessing her work as an ‘economic agent’, however, here I am concerned with the presentation and evaluation of Farren’s value in the press. From the outset of her London career, financial metaphors were used to ascertain her value. As I suggest above, the use of monetary language was not uncommon, but it is a notably regular feature of Farren’s press coverage. By assessing the presentation of her worth in the newspapers we can trace her development as she threatened the ‘singular commodity’ of established comic stars.

Farren debuted at the Haymarket theatre on 9 June 1777 as Kate Hardcastle in Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). As is usual for a debut, the press was broadly supportive of her efforts. The *Morning Chronicle* (10 June 1777) praised her form, ‘Her figure is genteel, her features pretty, and her face expressive’, and argued that ‘she bids fair to be a valuable acquisition’. The financial language did not stop there: the critic suggested that Farren’s skill was due ‘much to the credit of Mr. Younger’, who had been her manager at Liverpool and brought her to the Haymarket. Though ‘credit’ here simply commends Younger for Farren’s training, it is worth remembering the financial benefits to Managers for finding a new leading lady. Anticipating Farren’s subsequent identification with ‘polite lady’ types, the reviewer contends that she is ‘more perfect than most of the theatrical ladies who have been initiated into the profession in country seminaries’.

The *Morning Post* (10 June 1777) was similarly complimentary: it claimed, ‘her person is genteel, her voice is pleasing, and her features are lively and expressive’ and that she ‘promise[s] something very capital, in the walks of comedy, when she is a little more

[9] Brooks, *Playing Women*, pp. 26-30.

acquainted with the stage'. The sole 'pity' was that 'she should at any time misemploy those stage requisites in an imitation of a certain Lady of Covent-garden Theatre, which now and then we find the case'. That lady was Mary Bulkley, the original Kate Hardcastle and the leading comic actress at Covent Garden. The suggestion that Farren imitated Bulkley is a sign that she had not yet developed her own style, not uncommon in an inexperienced actress, but unlikely to be enough to secure an engagement at one of the winter theatres.

Three motifs emerge in these early reviews would recur throughout her career. First, particular attention to her physical qualities; this was not uncommon as many actresses were described in terms of their face and figure, but Farren's beauty becomes a central preoccupation. Attention to her form makes manifest the uncomfortable connection between her body and her selling point as a commodity. Second, the accusation of imitation of a fellow actress (here, Mary Bulkley) becomes a frequent criticism, especially in relation to her most successful comic predecessor: Frances Abington. Though imitation shows were immensely popular, the problem here is the suggestion she is merely delivering the part as another actress would.

A third and more precisely-tailored motif subsequently emerged: the accusation of 'affectation'. This was led by the critic in the *Morning Post* (13 August 1777); though he commended Farren's 'great characteristic spirit' in the part of Rosetta in Isaac Bickerstaffe's comic-opera *Love in a Village* (1763), he advised her 'friends to guard against her stage affectation, which she seems at present too much inclined too'. And though later he praised her 'well performed' Miss Tittup he also declared 'in our opinion a little more assumed affectation, and a little less *real*, would do no discredit either to the lady or the character'.[10]

Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) provides three meanings to the word 'affected', the first 'moved; touched with affection; internally disposed

[10] *Morning Post*, 19 August 1777.

or inclined' is a positive epithet in accordance with the virtuous feeling or sensibility, but the other two explicate the *Morning Post*'s attack: 'Studied with over-much care, or with hypocritical appearance' and 'in a personal sense, full of affectation; as, *an affected lady*'.[11] That her performances were received as 'studied' accords with the impression that Farren copied her fellow players. It is notable that the definition specifies the gendered association of affectation with women. But Johnson's definition perhaps belies another dimension to the critique of Farren: problematically her affectation was *too much* like the real ladies she impersonated.

Farren received adequate praise for the rest of the season: she 'made a very good figure' in the part of Maria in Arthur Murphy's *The Citizen* (1763), was 'very respectable' as Rosetta, her Miss Tittup in Garrick's *Bon Ton; or, High Life Above Stairs* (1775) was 'well performed', and by the end of the season she was 'making rapid strides to excellence in her profession'.[12] It is worth noting the occasional reference to money; in advance of Farren's appearance as Maria the *Morning Chronicle* (28 June 1777) reminded readers that 'Miss Elliot', the original, 'owed her theatrical fame and fortune entirely to Maria, in the Citizen'. This explicit reference to the potential of a part to transform one's life financially is significant: it draws attention to the fact that, for many, this is business as well as art. For Farren, an impoverished daughter whose widowed mother had taken to the stage before her to support her family, the stakes were high.

Despite repeated claims of her potential, Farren failed to secure a winter engagement. One reason for this might have been her relegation to more secondary roles throughout the summer following her debut. Jane Barsanti undertook the superior line of parts instead,

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[11] Samuel Johnson, 'Affected', in *A Dictionary of the English Language: A Digital Edition of the 1755 Classic by Samuel Johnson,* ed. by Brandi Besalke, <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/affected/> [accessed: 17 November 2015].
[12] *Morning Chronicle*, 1 July 1777; *Morning Post*, 13 August 1777; *Morning Post*, 19 August 1777; *Gazetteer*, 1 September 1777.

including Lady Fanciful in John Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* (1697) and Lady Townly in Vanbrugh and Colley Cibber's *The Provoked Husband* (1728). That Barsanti was Farren's nearest rival is indicated in the *Morning Chronicle* (2 September 1777), which declared Farren 'the greatest comic actress [Mrs. Lisley (formerly Barsanti) herself not excepted] that our stage is now in possession of.' If this was genuine praise, then it was high praise indeed; Barsanti had been celebrated as the original Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) before moving to the Crow Street Theatre in Dublin. If it was a puff, then this signals recognition that Farren had to secure her reputation by outshining Barsanti in particular.

Given that Farren was not engaged the following winter, it would be tempting to dismiss praise of Farren that season as either simply puffery or the kindness often given to newcomers. After all, her fellow newcomers received praise too: the *Morning Chronicle* (20 June 1777) praised Hester Colles as an 'an engaging figure' and 'a promising actress' following her first appearance as the lead in John Gay's *Polly* (1729), whilst the *London Evening Post* (7-10 June 1777) wrote that Miss Twist 'acquitted herself with great reputation' as Nysa in Kane O'Hara's *Midas* (1762). In fact, unlike Farren, both were engaged the following winter despite sparser attention to them throughout the season. It is worth remembering, however, that whilst there was a shared language to describe performances, they were in fact in different lines of business. Unlike Farren, who was vying for principal parts, Colles and Twist were useful in more minor roles, and as singers. Whilst Barsanti occupied the leading lady roles during the 1777 season Farren had little opportunity to showcase her worth; in effect, the stakes were higher for Farren because there were fewer principal parts.

One clue that her potential was not simply puffing is found in a letter from David Garrick, now retired, to George Colman the Elder, written following the first performance of Colman's *The Spanish Barber*:

I like Your Piece, & that other most promising Piece, Miss Farren–

> *-'tis a Shame that she is not fix'd in London–- I will venture my Life that I could teach her a capital part in Comedy, ay & tragedy too, that should drive half our Actresses mad–-* she is much too fine Stuff to be worn & Soil'd at Manchester & Liverpool–-[13]

Garrick's description of Farren as a 'promising Piece' and 'fine Stuff' associates her with a material commodity; her stock, however, was not yet apparently high enough to be sold on the patent stages. The sartorial metaphor evinces the longstanding connection between actresses and dress; leading ladies often became fashion icons – or became leading ladies because they were fashion icons. However, Garrick posits that she is 'too fine' and 'should drive half our Actresses mad' with some training; there is a sense here that Farren was perceived as a cut above her contemporaries and more like the polite fine ladies she embodied on stage. Aristocratic women too were frequently discussed in the press in terms of their dress.[14] Garrick also draws upon the subordinate status of the provincial stage; Farren here is 'too fine' for Manchester and Liverpool: she suits the metropolis. Often the provinces were considered as theatrical nurseries in which players could develop their skills. But rather than recommend her return to provincial theatres, Garrick presents them as a risk: if she is 'worn & Soil'd' she will be spoiled goods.

Farren returned to the Haymarket the following summer, reprising her roles as Kate Hardcastle and Rosina. This time, however, Barsanti did not return and so Farren was cast as Lady Fanciful and Lady Townly. These latter two roles signal a development in her repertoire from the silly ingénue parts she had undertaken the previous year to fashionable female leads. These additions were altogether more risky parts than those of the previous year; a breeches part, a part famed for its experienced actresses and a Restoration comedy role, rather than her previous modern parts. Her nearest rival was Mary Robinson, who was engaged by the

[13] Garrick, *The Letters of David Garrick*, III, p. 1187.
[14] Greig, pp. 101-02.

Haymarket on the proviso that she could choose her roles, though she never actually appeared, but nevertheless continued to be paid.[15]

Farren's new roles suggest an attempt to assert (whether on her part or the manager's) her candidacy for theatrical success. Her new roles, however, were less a diversification of Farren's talents than a consolidation. She was carving a path in the high comedy walk of 'ladies'. The only exception to this was her appearance in a breeches role, Nancy Lovel, in Colman's new comedy *The Suicide* (1778). The part was apparently originally intended for Robinson, whose figure was more suited to breeches roles, and she refused to perform anything else after the part was assigned to Farren.[16] Though 'Honest Ranger' wrote to the *Morning Chronicle* (25 July) to say Farren 'looked divinely' as Nancy, the general consensus was that she did not suit the part. In the *Morning Post* (21 July 1778) 'Dramaticus' described Farren as a 'very fine figure in petticoats' but 'surely the worst in breeches' and questioned whether it was 'the manager's partiality to this lady' or 'her own vanity' that led her to undertake the part. Once again, the sense that Farren was a 'fine lady' prevails, and she would have her opportunity to showcase this later in the season.

On 21, 26 and 29 August 1778 Farren played her most notable part to date: Lady Townly from Colley Cibber's *The Provoked Husband; or, the Journey to London* (1728), adapted from John Vanbrugh's unfinished *The Journey to London*.[17] Its title also recalls Vanbrugh's other play, *The Provok'd Wife* (1697)–which Farren would also appear in as Lady Fanciful later that season. Both the play and the part of Lady Townly had long been popular with London audiences, with its timely themes of the dangers of gambling and the difficult negotiation of women's role in marriage.

Before turning to the reception of Farren's performance, let us first consider the

[15] Byrne, *Perdita*, p. 86.
[16] Ibid.
[17] John Vanbrugh and Colley Cibber, *The Provoked Husband*, ed. by Peter Dixon (London: Arnold, 1975).

significance of the part, in terms of both finance and Farren's progress in the 'comic lady' line of business and finance. The ladies of polite comedies are, after all, affluent and penniless, creditors and debtors, and spenders and savers. We find heiresses, gamblers, and spendthrifts, some wise, some naive and some foolish. Lady Townly is one of the most extraordinary female parts in eighteenth-century comedy. Complex, full of pathos and very funny, the part requires exceptional range. It became a blueprint for subsequent 'town lady' characters on stage who reject the private domesticity of married life in favour of a public life of pleasure, anticipating later comic figures such as Lady Teazle in Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777), as well as Lady Delacour in Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* (1801). The latter, in particular, depicts the society lady as frustrated by a marriage to a weak-willed husband compared to her outgoing nature and vigour. In an inversion of traditional comic plots, Lady Townly is the rakish character to be reformed.

James Peck's work on the original Lady Townly, Ann Oldfield, reveals she established the 'line of business' that Farren would come to dominate at the close of the century. Peck reads Oldfield's success as Lady Townly, in the context of Whig hegemony, monetary policy and feminine ideology.[18] He persuasively argues that 'the scales of value that reward a performance are not only intrinsic to the theatre but intersect with registers of belief engaged in the ongoing, necessarily conflicting process of constructing the theatre'.[19] Oldfield established a theatrical identity that can be read, Peck demonstrates, as an index to both contemporary theatrical trends and the broader cultural landscape.

The measure of Farren's success, then, must be read against prevailing aesthetic, social and political concerns. But her performances (and person) were also measured against a theatrical scale established decades earlier; her value interpreted in relation to both her

[18] Peck.
[19] Peck, p. 399.

contemporaries and her predecessors on the comic stage. The part was popular from its inauguration by Ann Oldfield in 1727 – her final new role before her untimely death in 1730 aged forty-seven. Several actresses subsequently undertook the part including Frances Abington, Ann Barry (later Crawford), Mary Bulkley, Mary Ann Yates and Elizabeth Younge. The part was particularly popular, not only because of its pedigree (in which by performing it an actress aligned herself with earlier greats) but also because its pathos enabled actresses more commonly associated with tragic roles, like Yates, to be successful. By undertaking the role of Lady Townly, Farren was positioned alongside these performers; success would mean she would be credited alongside them as a comic star, but there was also a risk she would fail.

Risk – financial or otherwise – is a prevailing theme in *The Provoked Husband*. The opening scene sees Lord Townly deliver a monologue in which he criticises his wife. Although he has 'no reason to believe' that her reputation is 'in question', he doubts whether 'her profligate course of pleasures may make her able to keep it' and complains that she uses that 'single virtue' to do as she pleases the rest of the time.[20] Her fashionable behaviour is the source of his discontent as it poses a threat to the stability of marriage:

> Amazing, that a creature so warm in the pursuit of her pleasures should never cast one thought towards her happiness. Thus, while she admits no lover, she thinks it a greater merit still, in her chastity, not to care for her husband; and while she herself is solacing in one continual round of cards and good company, he, poor wretch, is left at large to take care of his own contentment.
>
> (I.1, p. 13)

His speech presents the triple themes of fidelity, fashionability and spousal happiness that are central to the play. It registers at once his particular anxieties and, more broadly, social expectations of a wife – and by extension, those of a husband. Lady Townly's pursuits include gaming, which acts as the governing metaphor for the play; the gamble of marriage is at least

[20] Vanbrugh and Cibber, I.1, p. 13-14. Further references made in text.

as risky as monetary high stakes.

It should be remembered too that Lord Townly pays for Lady Townly's pleasure and his exclusion from participating in her town life is another source of disappointment. The underlying threat that should Lady Townly be unable to pay for her debts, her fidelity may be compromised, reminds us that women's bodies were their only property – and that Lady Townly has no financial independence. Lady Townly's behaviour threatens his masculinity; the subtext to her subversion of domestic duty is Lord Townly's equal failure to fulfil the expectations of a husband. Notably he presents himself as cuckolded not by a lover but by her pursuit of pleasure for herself. Therefore, Lady Townly and women like her are not simply disruptive to social order but threaten the natural hierarchy of man and wife. Later comic husbands, such as Lord Teazle and Lord Delacour follow the pattern established here.

The main plot follows Lord Townly's attempt to curtail and control his wife's behaviour. With each encounter between them the animosity grows. Their witty repartee throughout reveals the mismatch in their attitudes, particularly regarding sociability, but not their rhetoric skill. As Lady Townly tells him, 'You complain of my late hours, and I of your early ones. So far are we even, you'll allow' (III.1, p.81-82). His inability to silence his wife is further testament to his lack of control in their marriage. She repeatedly deflects his criticism; for example, when he voices anxiety about the male company she keeps, she responds by questioning his 'sense' in worrying about 'powder-puffs', which colloquially referred to a fop suspected of homosexuality (III.1, p.83).[21] In doing so, she undermines her husband's authority and makes him appear irrational, a characteristic traditionally associated with women. Their conversation challenges expectations of marital roles. They are not wholly dissimilar in attitude, however, as both reveal their concern at how they are publicly perceived. Lady Townly

[21] 'Powder-Puff, n. and adj.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149158?redirectedFrom=powder-puff#eid> [accessed 16 July 2018].

demonstrates her focus on appealing to the 'eye of the polite world' whilst Lord Townly reveals that he too is not immune from the way the world views him.

Things take a darker turn when Lord Townly alludes to the sexual price Lady Townly risks if she is unable to pay her debts. Insulted, Lady Townly defends the company she keeps and suggests that it is his avarice, rather than her actions, governing him. That is, were she to have cheaper pleasures, she argues, he would not care. For Lord Townly, her use of her chastity as social and marital currency, rather than as a sign of her commitment to him or their marriage, places her in a dangerous position. For him, despite her fidelity, she has already committed 'adultery of the mind' in which she is intellectually disloyal and distanced from their union (v.2, p.137). Townly's phrase 'of the mind' makes a distinction important in that sexual sin in she-tragedies, in particular, is the death knell to social recovery – and is often fatal. So too, for the actress performing Lady Townly it was an important distinction that her transgression was only 'of the mind' so that her body would not be the site of performed sexual scandal.

Provoked for the final time, Lord Townly announces that they will separate and that 'the decent necessities of life shall be supplied – but not one article to luxury!'. He tells her that 'for the good lord, your dead father's sake, I will still support you, as his daughter', which reinforces her status as either a daughter or wife. Her potential losses draw attention to the unstable status of married women, reliant upon their husband, unless specific independent provision has been made for them. Lord Townly asks his sister, Lady Grace, and his friend, Manly, to witness his confrontation with his wife. Both symbolise the ideal of each sex with regard to moderation of behaviour and good sense. Despite their shared antipathy towards Lady Townly's excesses, both struggle with Lord Townly's approach. Their hesitation suggests that *The Provok'd Husband* does not endorse Lord Townly's approach. Instead it condemns the extremes of behaviour in fashion society – even those of a 'provoked' husband.

The play exposes not only how women are judged by objective ideals but also how they

stand up alongside other women. Lady Grace's actions determine the standard by which we should judge Lady Townly. For Elaine McGirr, the play's lesson is that 'the female character should be moderate'.[22] Lady Grace emerges as that moderate figure, who balances town and country life. Lady Townly disbelieves that 'a woman of spirit […] can dream of living soberly', but Lady Grace confesses she should 'like it very well' to live half the year in town and half the year in the country (III.1, p.89). At play's end, Lady's Grace's moderation earns her Manly. But this exchange, in which Lady Grace matches Lady Townly's repartee, something her husband often fails to do, suggests that it is another woman, rather than men's rule, that can police other women's behaviour.

Lady Townly's reformation or recovery also enables the actress at the end of the performance not only to be a lady but also a model lady. The role was profitable because it was popular, but also because it afforded a cultural capital, in which the actress both reflected and shaped the lady ideal. Lady Townly's reformation suggests the ideal is both possible and necessary. Somewhat more disconcertingly for established social hierarchy is that the actress performing Lady Townly must convincingly pass as a lady, reinforcing the idea that the 'town lady' is a learned construct – and can be learned by anybody. Indeed, Felicity Nussbaum shows Ann Oldfield did not simply reflect the aristocracy before her but was at the forefront of shaping the image and identity of the 'lady'.[23]

Like Lady Townly, ultimately measured against the moderate Lady Grace, actresses too are not judged individually but in comparison with other actresses. Once again, we see that the newspapers functioned as the curators of cultural memory, shaping the reception of new performances by *remembering* the old. Farren's youth and inexperience became a point of interest for commentators. Consider this anticipatory report in the *Morning Chronicle* (20

[22] Elaine M. McGirr, *Eighteenth-Century Characters: A Guide to the Literature of the Age* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 118.
[23] Nussbaum, pp. 109-12.

August 1778):

> To-morrow evening Miss Farren is to appear in the character of Lady Townley [sic]; a great and arduous undertaking for so young a student of the theatre! In point of figure and feeling, we can from example form an expectation rather favourable than otherwise. The times call aloud for capital actresses. Great merit is frequently casually discovered; Miss Farren will have for her judges a tribunal remarkable for its singular candour and indulgence; should she succeed, the attempt will make her fortune. She cannot fail altogether, but even were that possible, the boldness of the attempt will more than save her credit.

The critic invokes typical judicial language in order to appeal to the fairness of the audience. It reminds us not only that the newspapers played a key role in mediating players to the public, but that the public too played an important role: their reception could make or break a star. By emphasising the difficulty of the part this acts as a kind of extensive puff, which credits her with some kind of success: whatever the result with the potential to set her up for a bigger triumph if she succeeds. A financial thread runs through this too; undertaking such a difficult part is presented as a gamble, but it also appears to be risk-free: at best, Farren 'will make her fortune' and at worst 'the boldness of the attempt will more than save her credit'. The financial metaphor underscores the important fiscal concerns of actresses. Farren's success was a financial as well as theatrical concern and was particularly salient for an actress playing Lady Townly.

Following the performance, a mini paper war erupted between the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning* Post. Although the *Morning Chronicle* (22 August 1778) censured her 'occasional childishness of manner' it otherwise commended her 'very respectable figure in Lady Townley [sic]' and argued that she 'played the character much better than could have been expected'. By contrast, the *Morning Post* (22 August 1778) complained, 'Miss *Farren* can never please the rational part of an audience in *Lady Townly*, or any thing else, so long as she sacrifices so grossly to the most unnatural affectation'. Three days later, a 'Candid

Observer' in the *Morning Chronicle* (24 August 1778) defended Farren by praising her 'beyond parallel fine' figure and 'lively manner'. Though he acknowledges her youth and inexperience, he calls to 'give her credit for the share of merit she already possesses, and give her time to arrive at the degree of excellence necessary to render her a capital actress'. He attacks the 'illiberal mode of persecution' executed by the rival critic: 'I cannot help expressing my concern at the cruelty of the critic of the *Morning Post*, who seems determined to extinguish Miss Farren altogether by a single word'. That word, of course, was 'affectation'.

Upon Farren's return to the Haymarket that year, the *Morning Post* had resumed its campaign against her 'affectation'. The reviewer remarked upon her 'usual affectation' in Rosetta; complained 'Miss *Farren* only the tip-top of affectation in *Miss Hardcastle*'; then 'Dramaticus' rounded off his attack on Farren's Nancy Lovel by saying 'By an affected modesty, for it is merely affectation, she entirely destroys the effect of one of the most laughable scenes in the whole comedy'.[24] The impression given is a sense of unwarranted superiority. It also re-iterates her inexperience with real fashionable women. Unlike the mature Frances Abington, for example, who had the benefit of extensive interaction with real 'town ladies', the relatively inexperienced and working-class Farren could only produce a kind of caricature on stage. If Siddons had had to master the 'passions' and shake off signs of her itinerancy, then Farren had to convince the public that her fineness was genuine. The notoriety of bad press simply encouraged puffs in her defence, resulting in increased media attention. This, coupled with her appearances in key roles like Lady Townly that presented her as a contender for the leading parts at the winter theatres, resulted in her 1778 season materially different from the year before. She began the 1778/79 winter season playing at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

Farren debuted at Covent Garden on 23 September 1778 as Clarinda in *The Suspicious*

[24] *Morning Post*, 12 June 1778; 02 July 1778; 21 July 1778.

Husband. The *Gazetteer* (24 September 1778) offered brief praise of her qualities then outlined some defects in her 'quickness of conception', 'easy elegant archness of manner' and 'unaffected gentility' that are 'absolutely necessary' for the part. The only specific comment upon her acting was that 'it was frequently too evident that she was endeavouring to remember the instructions she had received, rather than attending to the suggestions of her judgment'. Though these qualities 'certainly point her out as a proper and useful recruit in the theatrical corps' the critic argues that 'she is far from possessing those talents, or that knowledge in her profession, which will permit her to rank in the first line of comedy'. The *Morning Chronicle* (24 September 1778) continued its support of Farren by claiming that her performance 'confirmed the justice of every report we have heretofore delivered in her favour, but gave us additional hopes of her being in a few years an excellent actress'. The *Morning Post* did not review her Clarinda at all.

Another 'Candid Observer' signed a letter in the *Gazetteer* on 29 September (the name had been used previously on 24 August in the *Morning Chronicle* in a letter supporting Farren). The 'Candid Observer' begins by defending the *Morning Chronicle* against accusations of puffing: 'the writer in her favour has freely pointed out her errors'. Then the writer goes on to complain the *Gazetteer* did not take account of Farren's 'youth and inexperience' in its review of her Clarinda, and then reminds readers that she 'is yet in her noviciate [sic]'. The implication that the theatre business is a kind of religious order stresses the sense that it is a vocation and Farren is in training.

And yet, her increasingly superior parts demand that she be judged accordingly (that is, by comparison with stars like Mary Bulkley and Frances Abington). Her supporters, however, sought to have her measured against a more junior scale. On 25 September *The Morning Chronicle* printed another defence of Farren, which presents her as 'a theatrical pupil'. Though the critic denies either Farren or the manager were attempting to set Farren up to rival the

established stars, her next Covent Garden role does suggest that she was vying for top billing. Just a week later, on 30 September, she appeared again as Lady Townly.

The *Morning Chronicle* (1 October 1778) once again describes the part of Lady Townly as an 'arduous task' and credits Farren with 'at least a candid and favourable, if not a very commendatory report'. Nevertheless, the critic remarks that 'there was a want of weight, of importance, and dignity, which as nothing but practice and maturer years can give her, the town must wait for with patience'. These primary complaints signal not a lack of talent, but a lack of experience. Recalling Farren's youth, however, serves to remind readers of more mature actresses to whom Farren was now a threat, if not yet an established rival. Compared with its review of her Lady Townly at the Haymarket, this review strikes a more critical tone, which attests to the different standards applied to the summer and winter theatres.

A more damning review appeared in the *Gazetteer* (1 October 1778):

> LAST night The Provok'd Husband was performed at Covent-garden theatre, the parts of Lord and Lady Townley [sic] by Mr. Digges and Miss Farren – an association which is greatly to the disadvantage of both, and injures the proper effect of this excellent comedy, as it gives the disputes between them rather the appearance of the lectures of a father to his daughter, than the quarrel[s] of husband and wife. Whilst Mr. Digges adds perhaps too much to the gravity of the character, Miss Farren seems rather to represent what Lady Townley [sic] might have been at boarding-school, than the full-blown woman of fashion and the ton. As from the present illness of Mrs. Bulkely [sic] there appears to be some danger that the town will lose that excellent actress, this seems to be a very proper occasion of adopting the new scheme of borrowing performers, as there are three excellent Lady Townley's [sic] at Drury-lane, and Covent–garden appears to be in great want of one.

The central criticism here is the thirty-four year age-gap between Farren and West Digges, which apparently resulted in a father-daughter dynamic, rather than that of husband and wife. This age gap may well have been exacerbated by Digges's 'antiquated style of acting', alluded

to in the review as 'gravity'.[25]Although Digges had played opposite her during the summer, the *Gazetteer* had not made this complaint then, further evidence of the vicissitudes of the press and perhaps the higher expectations of players at Covent Garden or Drury Lane.

One reason for the oddity of the Digges-Farren partnership is the history of older actresses in the part (Oldfield was 45 when she first played it) resulted in this husband and wife dynamic being lost or underplayed in performance. However, the age gap seems a plausible reading of the text; at times Lord Townly acts more like that of a father than a husband. For example, during the separation scene he says 'if time and your condition brings you to a due reflection, your allowance shall be increased. But if you still are lavish of your little, or pine for past licentious pleasures, that little shall be less!' (V.2, p.139). The paternalism here *is* further heightened by the age-gap between Farren and Digges, but blurring the husband-father/wife-daughter role reveals, perhaps, an uncomfortable truth about marriage rather than miscasting, a theme which Sheridan addresses in *The School for Scandal* (1777), which had premiered the year before. Moreover, as Lisa Freeman observes, 'whilst physical characteristics might be taken into consideration in casting, they were not always determining factors'.[26] More important was role ownership; at Covent Garden the part of Lord Townly belonged to Digges, and Farren likely only had the opportunity due to Mary Bulkley's illness, which prevented her from appearing.

Nevertheless, the *Gazetteer* took exception to the partnership; complaining about the age gap was really a means to attack Farren's inexperience: the reviewer is simply not convinced by Farren's performance as a 'woman of fashion and the ton'. The three Drury Lane rivals were Mary Ann Yates, Elizabeth Younge and Frances Abington, all of who had played the part of Lady Townly in the past few years. Recalling these experienced players has the

[25] Phyllis T. Dircks, 'Digges, West (1725?–1786)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online], <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7640>.
[26] Freeman, *Character's Theater*, p. 31.

effect of transforming Farren's youth from an asset to a fault. Of the trio, it is Abington that was most frequently depicted in the press as Farren's superior and rival; Farren frequently undertook roles that had been originated by, or at least closely associated with, Abington. Unusually, for the first few months of the season Farren played at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane. It was at Drury Lane, however, where Farren and Abington were cast as rivals, and it is to that I now turn.

Farren first appeared at Drury Lane on 8 October 1778 as Charlotte Rusport in Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771) – a part that Abington had originated. The plot concerns the fortunes (or lack of) of the Dudley family. Charlotte Rusport is an heiress to a great fortune, and in love with Charles, who does not confess his love for her because of his financial circumstances. Charlotte contrives to help the Dudleys by selling her jewels. Though she is not the leading ingénue (that is Louisa, Charles's sister, who eventually marries the titular character, Belcour), Charlotte drives the plot forward. When Charlotte engages Charles to take her jewels to Mr. Stockwell in exchange for £200, he enquires why she needs it, to which she replies: 'How can I possibly do without it, you mean? Doesn't every lady want two hundred pounds? Perhaps I have lost it at play; perhaps I mean to win as much to it; perhaps I want it for two hundred different uses'.[27] She dissembles here, affecting the behaviour of a stereotypical fashionable lady (gambling, frivolous use of money) in order to disguise her real intentions.

Like many comedies, money is the central conceit; more unusually, however, the play does not seek to contain or police the frivolous expenditure of an heiress. Rather it shows her sensible use of it. Despite her fortune, Charlotte's happiness remains doubtful; only once Charles has secured his own money, does he marry her. At which point of course, Charlotte's

[27] Richard Cumberland, *The West-Indian,* in *The Routledge Anthology of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Drama*, ed. by Kristina Straub, Misty G. Anderson, and Daniel O'Quinn (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), II.10, p. 700.

financial and legal independence will be restrained. The display of sensible financial independence, and the power to use it virtuously is particularly resonant for the actress playing her.

Playing the part was a further signal that Farren was following Abington's line of parts. Indeed, the *Gazetteer* (9 October 1778) speculated that 'Mrs. Abington has signified her resolution of resigning a great number of parts to this young actress'. The same article explained that *The West Indian* had not been performed for a few years because Abington no longer wished to play the part though 'seemed inclined to pout at its being done by another'. Given the practice of role ownership, for Farren to undertake the part at Drury Lane it was likely only done in consultation with (if not blessing of) Abington. Though this is only newspaper rumour (and not confirmed by Abington), there were limits to the extent a star actress could control the repertoire as managers had decided previously simply not to re-engage a player if they were becoming too difficult to handle. A clue to Abington's rumoured decision to pass on certain roles to Farren can also be found in the same article: Farren has 'solved the difficulty' to Abington to pass on Charlotte Rusport because Farren 'is possessed of something like Mrs. Abington's manner, but at a sufficient distance to remove all fear of rivalship'.

The rhetorical strategies used in this article, in which the authors mention rivalry by denying it, serves to create a sense of rivalry. Abington commanded a lot of power at Drury Lane, though the tone suggests public frustration that she was able to prohibit other actresses performing a role even if she did not want to perform. It raises questions as to why Abington 'signified her resolution of resigning a great number of parts' to Farren; did she in fact have little actual control over management decisions and is 'resigned' to it lamentably? Or is it that in seeming to surrender the role to Farren, Abington invites comparison, which will highlight Farren's deficiencies – and thus she does not view Farren as a threat. So too, Farren's performance would inevitably lead to recalling (likely favourable) reports of Abington, which

amounts to increased press coverage for her too.

The *Gazetteer*, the same paper that had condemned Farren's Lady Townly the week before, also censures her performance as Charlotte Rusport: '[she] minces the whole character into one uniform, one unified mass' and 'her deportment too wants the unaffected ease and politeness of the real woman of fashion'.[28] In the context of the rest of the article, which recalled Abington to the reader's mind, Farren is compared with the 'ghost' of her competitor. The paper defends itself from accusations of harshness too: 'If this very young Lady was not held up at so very great a height, we should not be so severe'. It is worth remembering, of course, that it was the press's attention to her (in which the *Gazetteer* participated in the summer) that had created this 'height'. The pun here on her height is also an example of rhetorical features that demand familiarity with the stage: a quip about Farren's height would have been recognisable first to those who had seen her perform, and second to those who regularly read the prints; for the casual reader, however, such a joke might have been lost.

The *Morning Chronicle* (9 October 1778), unsurprisingly, was more forgiving, employing similar motifs as it had throughout the summer. 'It must not be expected' argues the critic 'that so mere a novice as Miss Farren, can of a sudden tread in the same steps, or acquit herself with the same propriety' as Abington. Once again, the paper calls for leniency until Farren has had more experience: 'Grace, and polished manners, are only to be acquired by a strict observation of high life, and a judicious imitation of their example, both of which are works of time'. 'Upon the whole' her performance 'did her credit, and had no faults but that of being occasionally too light and flippant'. By acknowledging minor faults, the paper attempts to defend itself from the accusations of the bias found in previous papers. Once again, 'credit' is a significant term in the evaluation of Farren's performance.

Whereas the points and passions of tragic performance have been well documented, it

[28] *Gazetteer*, 9 October 1778.

would appear that central to the performance of high comedy is imitation through observation. Farren's subsequent desire for entry into fashionable circles, which went beyond the access other actresses achieved, might be traced to these early accusations. A strand running through several of the reviews is Farren's lack of exposure to high society, which limits the perception of her performances as caricatures of the 'lady', rather than true representation. These comments reinforce the tendency to conflate actresses' lives on and offstage. Farren's subsequent infiltration of aristocratic circles could be seen as an attempt to gain caché, whether or not it really did alter the performance style. But the knowledge (circulating in the press) that an actress did interact (intimately) with aristocratic groups, gives greater credence to her performance. Until Farren showed acquaintance with aristocratic circles, she would be perceived as putting on an act. In participating in aristocratic networks Farren again shadowed Abington's off-stage behaviour: Abington's long-term lover was William Petty, Marquess of Lansdowne (1737–1805).

Throughout her first Drury Lane season, periodicals presented Farren as following in Abington's path, the latter providing a model of celebrity onto whom Farren's could be mapped. Farren quit Covent Garden in January 1779 and continued at Drury Lane, where she remained until retirement in 1797. Abington's release (willingly or not) of certain parts provided Farren with opportunities, even if those opportunities firmly put her in Abington's shadow. During the 1778-79 season at Drury Lane, Farren appeared in thirteen characters; including two original parts, Lady Sash in Sheridan's *The Camp: A Musical Entertainment* (1778) and Louisa Freemore in Elizabeth Richardson's *The Double Deception* (1779). Besides Charlotte Rusport, several of her other roles had been previously undertaken by Abington including Clarinda in *The Suspicious Husband*, Penelope in Garrick's *The Gamesters* (1758) and Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700).

For some, Farren's new parts were unwelcome. A defence of Abington appeared in the

Morning Post on 3 November 1778:

> A correspondent who is an admirer of real merit, is sorry to perceive the name of Abington daily erazed [sic] from the play bills for such a substitute as Miss Farren. 'Tis to be hoped that this is only a [nine] days wonder, otherwise by degrees the town will entirely lose their greatest favourite. Miss F—- is a young actress of merit, but will never be of consequence sufficient to perform the first parts in comedy till she endeavours to divest herself of that self-sufficiency which she has no right to assume.

Despite acknowledging Farren as 'a young actress of merit', the correspondent attacks her on several levels; she is presented as a usurper who slyly 'by degrees' threatens the Town's 'greatest favourite'. I understand 'divest herself of that self-sufficiency' to mean that the correspondent expects more deference from Farren to Abington. There is an interesting paradox here; the writer appears to want Farren to acknowledge Abington, and yet earlier reviews condemned her imitative performances. Yes, Farren was on stage many more nights than Abington during October 1778, due to her appearance in Sheridan's very successful new afterpiece *The Camp*, which was immediately popular and played thirteen times between 15-31 October, but she was replaced by Sophia Baddeley from 29 October for the rest of the season.[29] Her other appearances that month at Drury Lane were her debut as Charlotte Rusport on 8 October and as the second Constantia in *The Chances* on 31 October; hardly a takeover. Meanwhile Abington appeared in her principal parts of Lady Teazle, Miss Prue and Millamant. The letter therefore misrepresents the reality of both Farren and Abington's first few weeks of the season, but it succeeded in laying the ground for the fertile suggestion that Farren is overtaking Abington's parts. For those regularly attending Drury Lane (or even attentive to the playbills) they would know this. Rather than thinking about theatrical press coverage as reportage, it is more useful to think of it as a kind of entertainment in its own right.

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[29] *The Camp* was staged fifty-seven times over the season (the most performed piece at either Covent Garden or Drury Lane).

Though Farren's erasure of Abington had not (yet) taken place on playbills, persistent discussion of her in the press was a kind of erasure of other players. Even her most ardent supporter, the *Morning Chronicle* (10 Oct 1778), reached saturation: 'Were not the writer of this article tired with so frequently speaking of Miss Farren, and did he not suppose his readers equally tired with the daily repetition of her name, he should enter largely into the merits of her last night's performance of Belinda in the comedy of *All in the Wrong*'. Too much attention, it seems, risked becoming a liability.

Though the evidence shows that Farren did not actually take Abington's parts, she was characterised in the press as a threat and condemned for the use of her repertoire to see off trouble: for example, on 2 January 1779 Abington played the part of Miss Tittup in *Bon Ton* for the first time in three years – though it had been performed by another actress, not Farren, in the interim. There is then no narrative of Farren taking over Abington's parts, however: for example, Farren replaced Abington as Millamant on 1 May 1779, and played her again the following year on 31 Oct 1780 – only to be replaced by Abington again later in the season. Such traffic at once belies the truth of fixed 'role ownership' rules and offers an interesting challenge to Roach's idea that the public could only accept one player in a part at any time. In fact, it might suggest that, by the closing decades of the century audiences were increasingly enjoying the tussle for dominance, perhaps due to the increased press attention such rivalries received. Although the *Gazetteer* had presented Abington as almost a mentor by passing on her parts, and a seamless transition, in reality, Abington worked hard to secure her dominance.[30]

[30] *Gazetteer*, 9 October 1778.

HAIR WARS: RIVALLING ABINGTON, RIVALLING ARISTOCRATS

> Miss Farren's hair-dresser has a horrid taste; he seems to conceive that making the head look large, gives it the appearance of elegance: the contrary is the case.[31]

This unfavourable comment in the *Morning Chronicle*, usually sympathetic to Farren, following her appearance as Lady Fanciful during the 1778 Haymarket season draws attention to another feature of theatrical reviews: fashion. For Farren, appearing on trend would become an important part of being seen a leading lady of high comedy. Here, however, though the hairdresser is attacked, Farren's lack of style – or affectation of style – is exposed.

Joseph Roach and Margaret Powell have shown that 'big hair' was an important cultural phenomenon, with the presentation of hair an index to social power for both men and women across the century.[32] They present hair as a 'minor but important art' that forms part of the 'social performance of every day life' in the eighteenth-century.[33] Adverts for hairdressers and hair products were placed in newspapers regularly. By the 1770s elaborate hairstyles, which were now predominantly associated with women, were a useful subject for satirists, who mocked the architectural triumphs crowning ladies' heads. Ostensibly these satires condemn luxury, dissipation and excess, but such attempts to police women's hair (their uppermost bodily boundary) is an example of denying women control. For example, Roach and Powell refer to the specific complaints about 'ladies' headdresses obstructing the view of those seated behind them at the playhouse': a gendered attack despite the fact that previously 'big hair' had not been gendered.[34]

Like other opulent markers, the materials, leisure time and extravagance needed to create 'big hair' was a testament to wealth, power and taste. An actress's hair, like other

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[31] *Morning Chronicle*, 3 September 1778.
[32] Margaret K. Powell and Joseph R. Roach, 'Big Hair', *Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 38 (2004), 79-99.
[33] Ibid., p. 81.
[34] Ibid., p. 89.

elements of her costume, was not an *accoutrement* but an integral part of the performance, both of the character and the performer. Farren's hairstyle is an attempt to appear fashionable – to pass as a real lady. The stakes were high; leading actresses did not only reflect fashions, but also direct them.

My interest here lies not in Farren's hair *faux pas* alone, but also in a curious circumstance reported in the *Public Advertiser* (13 October 1778) following Abington's first appearance of the new Drury Lane season on 6 October 1778 as Lady Teazle (shortly before Farren's debut at that theatre)**:**

> The *ponderous, towering Head dress*, which has been for some Time a *great Weight* upon Female Shoulders, is now lessening almost to its natural Size. Mrs. Abington has been one of the first to begin this Reformation in Dress, as she made her Appearance this Season in the School for Scandal *with her Hair remarkably low*, which exhibited such evident Marks of Propriety, that all the high Heads in the house looked more like *Caricatures upon Dress*, than *real Fashion*.[35]

In light of Farren's unfashionable hair, Abington's decision to sport 'her hair remarkably low' is surely an offensive rather than defensive tactic. Moreover, unlike Farren, whose error is the folly of a hairdresser, the assumption here is that Abington commands her style.[36] Not everyone was pleased: the *London Evening Post* (24-27 October 1778) reported that 'master hair-dressers' were apparently 'so incensed' by Abington's decision to sport a lower hairstyle. Like Ann Oldfield before her, however, Abington inspired trends and asserted her cultural authority against a newcomer like Farren (and over hairdressers) with this hair performance.

Time was a losing battle for Abington. In 1782 James Stewart published *Plocacosmos: Or the Whole Art of Hair Dressing*, a key text alongside William Barker's *A Treatise on the Principles of Hair-Dressing* (1780), both cited by Roach and Powell as foundational texts on

[35] Republished the following day in the *Gazetteer* (14 October 1778) and *Lloyd's Evening Post* (12-14 October 1778).
[36] Nussbaum, pp.226-236.

the art and industry of hair.[37] Stewart acknowledges that Abington 'has long been the standard of taste, in dress, air, gait, manners, and every grace, and easy external accomplishment, attending a woman of fashion; to which her height, symmetry of person, and *degagée* of manner, has considerably contributed: though she has, of late, been rivalled in this article by younger actresses'.[38] He describes Farren, by constrast, as 'the paragon of woman' – her beauty, long signified in the press, was her most striking feature.[39] Two years later Farren would appear in Richard Cumberland's new comedy *The Natural Son* (1784) as Lady Paragon.

The acknowledgement in *Plocacosmos* casts her as not merely the 'paragon of actress', but of 'woman'. This is important because of the significance of beauty in cultural hegemony. Hannah Greig argues that 'when associated with women of rank, the values presumed by contemporaries to comprise their beauty were closely tied to ideas of behaviour, manners and other qualities that were perceived to make these women fit and proper holders of their social status […] a fashionable woman could not, by definition, be anything but 'beautiful'.[40] Repeated invocations of Farren's beauty were an important factor in her developing social status as a lady, rather than an actress: if she could play the part, and look the part, then what differentiated her from real ladies.

Comparisons between Farren and aristocratic ladies were made from early in her career. Following her first appearance as Lady Townly in the Haymarket, the *Morning Chronicle* (27 August 1778) declared:

> Of this we are certain, not one of the actresses who have played the part for the last ten years has looked it half so well. The Duchess of Devonshire is not a more elegant figure in the Drawing-room on a birth-day than Miss Farren in the four first acts of the *Provoked Husband*.

[37] Powell and Roach, p. 81.
[38] James Stewart, *Plocacosmos: Or the Whole Art of Hair Dressing* (London: Printed for the Author), p. 233.
[39] Ibid., p. 235.
[40] Greig, p. 169.

Farren's looks, rather than her performance, enable her to be considered alongside her elite contemporaries. As her celebrity evolved it was at times indistinguishable from that of aristocratic women, who were also making headway into public life as political, social and cultural agents, and often presented in the newspapers as kinds of celebrities.

In time too, however, Farren did takeover Abington's parts. Perhaps no role induced recent memory of Abington as much as Lady Teazle, a part created for her by Sheridan in 1777.[41] When Farren finally undertook the part in 1782 (which she performed with no exceptions at Drury Lane until her retirement in 1797), it signalled her status as the principal player of the genteel lady parts that Abington had dominated for over a decade. Such was Abington's hold over the part that when news broke that Farren would be undertaking the part of Lady Teazle, the *London Courant* (24 September 1782) commented that news 'confirms the dismission [sic] of Mrs. Abington from Drury Lane'.

Lady Teazle epitomises the 'lady' role discussed earlier in the chapter. We can see her antecedents in characters such as Lady Townly. She is a youthful wife 'bred wholly in the country' and chosen by Sir Peter Teazle 'with caution', though after marriage he complains 'Yet now she plays her part in all the extravagant fopperies of the fashion and the town, with as ready a grace as if she had never seen a bush nor a grass plat [sic] out of Grosvenor Square'.[42] Lady Teazle is a country girl and, like the actress who plays her, she learned the part rather than having been born to it. Being a 'lady' is presented here as being a 'part' performed, reminding audiences of the performance of everyday life, and the uncertain boundaries between world and stage. As we shall see in the next section, the sense that you could learn, act and be accepted as a lady had particular implications in the press for Farren given her increasing (and publicly reported) participation in aristocratic circles.

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[41] Evans, p. 168.
[42] Sheridan, *The School for Scandal*, I.2. l.8-13, p. 59.

Despite Farren's increasing dominance, Abington ghosted the reception to her Lady Teazle. *Parker's General Advertiser* (27 September 1782) devoted much of the review to Abington, despite going on to claim that 'it would be truly injurious to the true interests of Miss Farren, to bring her on a comparison with her predecessor'. The critic offers only faint praise: 'if we had not seen Mrs. Abington, we should say of Miss Farren, that her Lady Teazle was happily sustained; but, remembering the original, we can but barely say, that it is a passable substitution'. The writer makes manifest the importance of memory to making meaning in performance, but this very same memory forecloses (on this occasion) a proper evaluation of Farren's performance.

Others were slightly more generous: the *Gazetteer* (27 September 1782) acknowledged Farren's 'difficulties' but remarked 'it is apparent, however, that she has really taken pains to study the *character* as well as the *part*, and she succeeded accordingly'. The critic offers here an interesting distinction between the character and part of Lady Teazle (a distinction between the general type and the specifics of the role). By contrast, the *Whitehall Evening Post* (26-28 September 1782) highlights the continued stock responses to evaluate players' performances. The *Whitehall Evening Post* (26-28 September 1782) claimed she 'acquitted herself in a manner much to her credit', 'looked most beautifully' and pronounced it 'some consolation' on Abington's departure 'to find, that there remain actresses, young indeed in their profession, and not quite perfect, who bid air to be one day the head and chief ornament of the stage'. Little about this commentary differs from the earliest reviews we find of Farren.

Despite the lacklustre praise, Farren became the leading genteel 'lady' at Drury Lane following Abington's departure to Covent Garden in 1782, undertaking her parts such as the Widow Belmour in Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him* (1760). Poised, knowing and fashionable, Widow Belmour guides Mrs. Lovemore to reclaiming her roaming husband and together they plot to restore and reform the marriage. As with Farren's first appearance as Lady

Teazle, the press remembered Abington. The *Morning Herald* (30 October 1782) complained that 'Miss Farren, in the part above mentioned, has evidently made Mrs. *Abington* her *model*, and copied her so servilely, that the best part of her performance may be called a *Sock plagiary*.' This idea of 'sock *plagiary*' – that is an imitative performance taken from another but passed off as one's own – recalls the earliest Farren criticism of simply replicating another's performance.

For the *Morning Chronicle* (30 October 1782) Farren 'sustained the vivacity of the Widow Belmour beyond our expectations', though does not have 'equal ability' to Abington. Three years later the same paper announced the 'comforting reflection' that the youthful Farren 'comes so near Mrs. Abington in talents', whilst the *General Advertiser* (28 November 1785) praised her as 'very little short of Mrs. Abington'.[43] Still, Farren's worth was judged by her comparison to Abington; on 7 February 1786 the *Morning Herald* praised her 'vivacity, fashion, and elegance' and claimed she 'proved herself worthy the *Abingtonian* school'. By 1787 Farren began to be evaluated on her own terms: the *World* (3 October 1787) declared 'we have not lately seen any thing more captivating than her *Widow Belmour*'.

In the period since Farren first arrived at Drury Lane, Farren secured her identification with genteel, polite lady roles, not only by undertaking Abington's former parts, but originating several new characters, most notably Lady Emily in John Burgoyne's *The Heiress* (1786), which was dedicated to his nephew, Edward Smith-Stanley, the Earl of Derby.[44] In doing so Farren finally proved her worth and came out from Abington's shadow. The public and press's acceptance of Farren in these roles, I suggest, was due in no small part to the staging of her private life in the press.

A letter written by Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory (14 June 1787) explains how much

[43] *Morning Chronicle*, 30 November 1785.
[44] John Burgoyne, *The Heiress* (London: J. Debrett, 1786), pp. i-ii.

Farren's reputation had changed:

> Etheridge, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Cibber wrote genteel comedy, because they lived in the best company; and Mrs Oldfield played it so well, because she not only followed, but often set the fashion. General Burgoyne has written the best modern comedy [*The Heiress*] for the same reason; and Miss Farren is as excellent as Mrs Oldfield, because she has lived with the best style of men in England; whereas Mrs Abington can never go beyond Lady Teazle, which is a second-rate character, and that rank of women are always aping women of fashion without arriving at the style.[45]

Walpole reverses the comments found in the press a decade earlier: it is now Abington, not Farren, who merely apes fashionable women. Having starred in *Bon Ton: High Life Above Stairs* as silly, naive, and modish Miss Tittup in her first Haymarket season in 1777, by the late-1780s Farren was intimately connected with the real-life Bon Ton. Her set included Anne Seymour Damer (with whom she was rumoured to have had a lesbian relationship), Horace Walpole and the Duchess of Devonshire. Her friendships were not only an asset to her performance style, but also served to raise interest in performance by the attendance of her friends.[46] Having established the media response to Farren as a player, I now turn to the attention to Farren for her non-professional, social networking, activities.

PLATONIC LOVERS, FASHIONABLE FRIENDS AND THE PUBLIC PRINTS

Speculation about Farren's romantic life and behaviour was rife and included a rumoured dalliance with Charles James Fox.[47] By the early 1780s she was involved in a long-term relationship with the Earl of Derby and the newspapers enjoyed gossiping about it. Farren was

[45] Walpole, pp. 563-64.
[46] See, for example, the *World* (28 October 1789) which is as much interested in the attendance of Damer and others, as it is Farren's performance.
[47] *Morning Post*, 15 November 1780; *Morning Herald*, 14 December 1780; *St. James's Chronicle*, 28 February–2 March 1782.

tall and beautiful, and he was squat and unattractive: it is no surprise that the accusations of cupidity ghosts contemporary press coverage. The *Morning Post* (14 April 1781), for example, claimed the pair had had a 'small *fracas*', which was resolved when Derby 'presented her with an *oaken* box, adorned with a beautiful miniature of *himself*, in the character of *cupid*'. Perhaps anticipating her to simply retire from the stage (a kept woman) the *Morning Herald* (4 April 1781) reported that 'The *elevated* Miss *F—n* takes her *theatrical* leave of the *town* at her approaching benefit, and means then to rush into all the extremes of *fashionable life*!'. She did not; she continued to work until they married shortly after the death of his estranged first wife, Elizabeth Hamilton, in 1797.

Relationships between actresses and aristocrats were not uncommon; in fact, the *Morning Post* took the liberty of printing '*Coalitions between Great Men and Theatrical Ladies*', listing notable liaisons.[48] But Farren's relationship was a particular topic of mirth because, it was claimed, they had a 'platonic relationship'. The *Morning Herald* (2 December 1786), for example, joked that Farren's upcoming benefit performance would be 'The *Platonic Lady*—To which will be added, *Marry or do worse*'.

[48] *Morning Post*, 5 March 1785.



Figure 1 William Dent, *The Platonic Lovers* (BMSat 6714), 29 March 1784, etching on paper, 240 × 224mm, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Satirists made fun of both their physical disparity and their insistence upon their 'platonic' relationship, as in William Dent's *The Platonic Lovers* (29 March 1784). Dent uses the theatrical setting to send up the Farren-Derby relationship (especially its claims to propriety). The couple sits, kissing (though crucially separated by the box) in a theatre box – accompanied by her apparently ever-attendant mother as chaperone to legitimise the action. The very public display of their intimacy is vulgar and though positioned in the spectators' space they are in fact the ones on show. The title recalls the Caroline play *The Platonick Lovers* (1636) by William Davenant, which mocks the concept of platonic love. The Earl is labelled as 'Lord Doodle', meaning foolish, whilst Farren is again conflated with Miss Tittup (a part

she continued to play at Drury Lane): another wry attack upon Farren's virtue as Tittup conducts an illicit affair with her cousin's husband.[49]

The theatrical setup not only evinces the importance of the theatrical metaphor for exposing public figures' private lives, but also reinforces Farren's dubious status as an actress. Beneath the image reads, 'What a charming life I lead to what I did – my Lord likes me – and I like my Lord'. This musing reminds the viewer that Farren's relationship had elevated her into a now 'charming life'. Though by no means as malicious as some of the verbal reports in the newspapers, the sense that that they 'like' each other for different reasons lingers.

Amongst Farren's contemporaries, Frances Abington, Dora Jordan, and Mary Robinson were all in very public 'illegitimate' relationships. Farren's public protestations of a virtuous relationship, however, was unusual. Her claims to chastity (gestured in Dent's satire by a belt marked 'Cestus') enabled Farren to remove herself from the 'suspect' sexuality of her predecessors and her contemporaries – in accordance with the unimpeachable Siddons. Her unambiguous reputation potentially facilitated the close friendships with members of the *bon ton*, who operated under strict social mores. Put in economic terms, Farren did not settle for less than marriage, and this bought her more social cache than the status of mistress.

The press coverage, though often light-hearted gossip, sometimes took on a more censorious tone. A correspondent signed 'H' wrote a letter to the *Morning Chronicle* (2 August 1781) to defend Farren from recent gossip. The writer declares himself 'ignorant of the crime that has drawn such a load of calumny upon the conduct of Miss Farren' and affirms he has 'not the most distant connection, or personal knowledge of Miss Farren, but as an actress of confessed merit'. Though the original letter is untraced this response gives a clue to its content: 'A letter writer, in one of the papers of this day [30 July], not satisfied with basely levelling her

[49] 'doodle, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56792?rskey=IJihhn&result=1&isAdvanced=false> [accessed 8 January 2019].

chastity to the standard of his own probity, has added to the infamy by making her own mother stand bawd'.[50] Farren's mother reportedly acted as a chaperone in order to publicly corroborate propriety, although this was both ridiculed and doubted (as the image above attests). The accusation of 'Bawd', however, is a more serious charge. Again, it undermines Farren's tenuous claims to virtue by invoking the deep-rooted connection between actresses and prostitution. The financial element is important; it does not simply cast doubt upon Farren's chastity but is presented as a monetary exchange. Doubt about the precise nature of Farren and Derby's relationship, and what precisely she desired from it, remained a strong theme of Farren's media representation.

Interactivity between visual and verbal media characterises the celebrity apparatus in the 1780s. The particular fascination with Farren's private life, as well as high praise of her acting, makes her a particularly fine example for the transition of an actress from celebrated player to a public person. By this I mean that, as Farren's career progressed media interest was no longer contingent on her stage appearances; she became a 'celebrity' in its most distilled sense: known for being known.

Farren's ostensibly 'private' activities were, of course, often staged to the public through the newspapers. Her involvement with the Richmond House private theatricals in 1787 and 1788 exemplifies the very public nature of her off-stage activities. In Spring 1787 Farren acted as 'superintendent' for the Richmond House Theatrical's production of Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him,* and again in 1788 for Susannah Centlivre's *The Wonder.*[51] Farren was not alone in assisting *The Way to Keep Him*, both Abington and Siddons served too, the latter also having played Mrs. Lovemore in 1785 to much media interest.[52]

Sybil Rosenfield somewhat ungenerously claims that it was 'common knowledge' that

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[50] I suspect the letter was printed in either the *General Advertiser* or the *Gazetteer*, both daily papers that I have not located for this date.
[51] *The World*, 9 January 1788.
[52] *Public Advertiser*, 28 Nov 1785; *Morning Chronicle*, 30 November 1785; *Morning Herald*, 7 February 1786.

Farren 'owed her appointment' to her lover Earl Derby.[53] She had, however, like Abington and Siddons, played in *The Way to Keep Him*, and did not act as superintendent for all the productions, though Derby appeared in several. If anything, contemporaries were more surprised by Derby's inclusion than hers. The *Town and Country Magazine* (May 1787), for example, expressed their surprise that Derby was cast as the attractive straying husband Lovemore given that 'the principal objections to Lord Derby were his figure, face and voice', though the reviewer admitted his 'manner was excellent and supported with spirit'. The following year the *Morning Post* (8 Feb 1788) praised Derby's performance as Colonel Bristol in *The Wonder* and suggested he 'has profited much by the good instruction which we suppose he has received from the representative of Thalia at Drury-lane'.

Though private theatricals were a common pastime amongst families of all classes, aristocratic theatricals were hardly 'private'.[54] They might more productively be described as 'exclusive' events, in which attendance at a performance was limited to those specially invited, by contrast to the professional stage where the ability to purchase a ticket was the major discriminatory factor. After all, as Gillian Russell observes, private theatricals had the potential to be 'very public indeed'.[55]

Sections such as 'Ton Theatricals', 'Private Theatricals' and 'Theatricals of the Ton' appeared regularly and detailed casting, rehearsals and attendees. Perhaps most disarmingly, some private theatrical news appeared alongside general theatrical gossip, whilst others drew direct parallels between the patent and private stages; the *Morning Chronicle* (5 January 1788), for example, remarked that 'the rehearsals are attended with as much strictness, as would be exemplary in a common play-house'. It is notable too that newspapers used the same kinds of

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[53] Sybil Rosenfeld, *Temples of Thespis: Some Private Theatres and Theatricals in England and Wales, 1700-1820* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1978), p. 35.
[54] Helen E. M. Brooks, "One Entire Nation of Actors and Actresses': Reconsidering the Relationship of Public and Private Theatricals', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film,* 38.2 (2011), 1-13 (pp. 1-5).
[55] Gillian Russell, 'Private Theatricals', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830,* ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 191-203 (p. 192).

evaluative language to review performances. As Andrew Elfenbein reminds us, however, few journalists would have had direct access to the performances, so the papers would have been fed information from insiders.[56] The staginess of the reviews, then, should be considered as print entertainments too, designed to replicate, in all kinds of ways public theatre – including the propensity for puffing.

Writing on Ann Seymour Damer, who frequently appeared in the Richmond House Theatricals, Elfenbein suggests that participating in private theatricals provided an opportunity for fashionable women to shape their public personas (much like actresses used their parts).[57] Appearing in private theatricals was not necessarily fraught with the same level of social and sexual implications as the public stages. That said, for many, participation in theatricals enabled a legitimate form of public display, free from the derogations of 'work', albeit one ostensibly couched within domestic spaces.

But what of the professional actresses who undertook advisory roles? They could not perform alongside their amateur counterparts because this could bring the aristocratic women into disrepute. So whilst Farren's role as advisor does indicate her close links with this aristocratic set, her advisory role nevertheless marked her out as different from the other women: they shared a social circle, yes, but it would be a mistake to consider her as their equal.[58] That actresses 'taught' aristocratic women to play stage ladies further establishes the distinction between 'natal' aristocrats and those who play a learned role. That the 'real' ladies needed coaching on how to act as a lady reminds us that the fictional characters were, of course, stylized creations and the manners expected of a lady on stage did not map simply on to those practiced by aristocratic women in their own milieu and cannot simply be considered as the

[56] Andrew Elfenbein, 'Lesbian Aestheticism on the Eighteenth-Century Stage', *Eighteenth-Century Life,* 25.1 (2001), 1-16 (p. 7).
[57] Ibid. See also Brooks, 'One Entire Nation', pp. 3-4.
[58] Rosenfeld discusses the professional players, John Edwin and Thomas Ryder, who participated (as actors) in Earl of Barrymore's Theatricals at Wargrave in Rosenfeld, p. 19.

same. Nevertheless, Farren's part in these private theatricals enabled her to 'pass' as a lady, legitimately, in public. It was friendship, not her performances as ladies that transformed Farren into a fashionable 'It' girl. The Set's acceptance of Farren alongside her noble counterparts is evinced by the scenery for *The Way to Keep Him*, painted by John Downman, in which Farren was depicted alongside others including the Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Melbourne and Lady Elizabeth Foster, who also did not appear in the production.

There were professional benefits for players to involve themselves in private theatricals. Rosenfeld notes that Farren 'astutely' appeared in George Colman the Elder's *The Jealous Wife* (1761) following the Richmond House Set's own staging of the play.[59] But she had also appeared in *The Jealous Wife*, as Mrs. Oakley, just prior to the Richmond House production. This was not uncommon: a loose reciprocity existed between the professionals and the amateurs.[60] By appearing in a play that the Richmond House set desired to perform, Farren could capitalize upon the renewed interest in a play or securing benefit night patronage (ticket sales) from aristocrats who attended the performance in advance of their own production. The previous year Farren appeared as Widow Belmour following the Richmond House production, 'for the purpose', according to the *World* (21 May 1787), 'of gratifying the curiosity of the people of fashion'. Such a notice in the newspaper served also to alert readers that an elite audience was expected.

The Richmond House Theatricals were a watershed moment in Farren's celebrity. From this point onwards, Farren's media presentation increasingly centred upon her identification with real fashionable ladies, rather than her fashionable parts, despite the fact that she continued to play leading comic roles at Drury Lane. What had value to Farren also perhaps shifted. On 15 March 1790, *The Diary or Woodfall's Register* reported:

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[59] Ibid., p. 43.
[60] Brooks, 'One Entire Nation', pp. 2-3.

> Last year that unrivalled actress Miss Farren had 600l. for 12 nights in Dublin! This summer she has had offers much greater still! with clear benefits, chaises and four, post paid, &c. &c. and by the way of Port Patrick, to get at them!
> But this it seems is not her way. Miss F. refuses them all, and not acting any where, passes the summer at Lady Milner's, the Dutchess [sic] of Richmond's, and Lady Aylesbury's.

This report at first appears to strike a different tone from those which had previously attacked her cupidity. The excitable incredulity of this paragraph obscures a more cynical response. Farren apparently rejects earnings for her fashionable friends, but the value of social networking outweighs the benefits of appearing in Dublin. If we recall Garrick's private comments made at the start of Farren's career, in which he worried that she would be sullied by further exposure in the provinces, it would appear that Farren too had reached a similar conclusion. Of course, she was retreating to the country, but not on a public stage.

Let us now turn to consider the impact knowledge of Farren's off-stage life had on her career. Visual culture provides much evidence for tension between Farren the lady and Farren the actress. Graphic satires published during the 1790s, in particular, play upon her dual identities as player and fashionable icon (or at least, Derby's lover) and respond to current news stories.

In December 1790, the press reported that Farren refused to appear as the Widow Belmour following a dispute with the Managers about her dress (hence Farren's nakedness in the image above).[61] On 1 December Drury Lane staged *The Way to Keep Him* with Mrs Goodall playing Widow Belmour instead. The *Gazetteer* (December 15, 1790) rumoured that Farren had the 'intention of resigning her situation', though she continued to appear in other roles such as Lady Teazle and Lydia Languish. Farren's decision not to appear is a clear example of her exerting control over herself and her parts. We cannot know whether it was Farren or the

[61] *The Times*, 4 Dec 1790; *The Times*, 7 Dec 1790.

managers who spread the story, but if it was Farren, then the following graphic satire, *A Peep Behind the Curtain at the Widow Belmour*, by James Sayers, which depicts a lecherous Derby peering at a naked Farren, evinces the limitations of control over a story.



Figure 2 James Sayers, *A Peep behind the Curtain at the Widow Belmour* (BMSat 7736), December 1790, etching on paper, 272 × 192mm © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Speeches from Derby and Farren respectively, cunningly woven around her naked figure, critique Farren's demands for a new dress:

> fye ye Linleys curse your niggard Hearts
> Why won't you let Miss Farren dress her Parts
> Were I of Drury's Property the Sovereign,
> I'd give the lovely maid a choice of Covering.
>
> Here I stand a fresh proof of our Managers Meanness
> Not a rag to my back like the Medici's Venus
> At the second hand Wardrobe I turn up my Nose.
> By the Lord I won't act till they find me new Cloaths [sic]

The first speech opens by condemning the Linleys, Richard Sheridan's in-laws, who were charged with managing the theatre, for miserliness. The exaggerated language is laughable and highly theatrical, an indication perhaps that Farren's dispute was seen as a performance. The second line concerns who has the right to control the presentation of a part, Farren or management. Appearing in the latest fashions (looking the part) on stage played a crucial role in being seen as a leader of fashion and was therefore crucial to Farren's theatrical practice. Denying her control over her dress is an attempt to control her 'commodity'. 'Drury's Property' ostensibly means the props department in charge of the company's effects – such as costume – but there is a duality here hinting at Farren as property too. The choice of 'Sovereign' here too bears a nice double meaning – affirming that the central anxiety is financial, and clothing a metonym for that anxiety. Negotiating clothing allowances had been a part of salary deals for several decades and to be bought a new dress was a significant outlay. Derby's salacious look is at odds with the idea he would give her 'choice'; her 'Covering', disturbingly, might well be his body. The second speech ridicules Farren's poverty performance, presents her as a snob and her refusal to act as stroppy: she is not in *need* of a new dress, nor the money to purchase one. Such mockery undermines her as an independent economic agent and misrepresents her demands for a new dress (work clothes) as a plea for poverty or diva-like, when in fact the

negotiation for costumes was standard practice. Sayers draws upon both the particulars of the recent story, and established motifs about Farren and Derby. The print registers anxieties about women as economic agents and demonstrates the power of print culture, both periodical and graphic, to interpret actress's behaviour. It also goes to show that whilst Farren may have exerted control by refusing to perform, she could not control the press reaction.

The inability to control the use of one's public image is even more acute in another story involving Farren and the managers. In November 1796 Farren did not turn up at Drury Lane to perform (even though she had been at rehearsal), leaving the audience waiting. Disputes between actresses and management were not uncommon, but what is notable about this case are two different letters, offering conflicting accounts of the situation, which were published in the newspapers: both were signed Elizabeth Farren.[62] The first, which appeared in the *True Briton* (1 December 1796) says 'that the only cause of my not appearing was a considerable failure of the Managers in performing the pecuniary part of my Engagement', but the letter that appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* (1 December 1796) and *Morning Post* (1 December 1796) claims that only 'being so unwell' prevented her from appearing and she hopes that her 'grateful respect' for the public 'will entitle me to credit'. The first letter could be read as Farren asserting her professional rights, or simply yet another attack in the press on her cupidity. The second letter gives an insight into the relationship between player and part; it is on the one hand apologetic to the audience, yet it also claims 'credit' for previous good behaviour. It was unusual, though not unheard of, for actresses to directly write into the newspapers.[63] But as this episode suggests, it was fraught with risks: in print, at least, one's name might simply be yet another fiction.

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[62] *St. James's Chronicle*, 29 November – 1 December 1796; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 29 November – 1 December 1796; *Oracle*, 2 December 1796.

[63] Elizabeth Massey wrote a letter to the *Morning Chronicle* (9 September 1777) in order to 'rectify some mistakes'. In September-November 1789 a dispute between Dora Jordan and Edinburgh Manager, William Jackson, escalated in which both apparently published letters in the papers. A letter signed by Jordan appeared in the *Diary or Woodfall's Register* (21 October 1789).

CODA: THE COUNTESS



Figure 3 James Gillray, *Contemplations upon a Coronet* (BMSat 9074), 20/5 March 1797, hand-coloured aquatint and etching on paper, 364 × 262 mm © Trustees of the British Museum.

Throughout the 1790s Farren was increasingly depicted in visual satires as a craven, avaricious lady of fashion, reaching its zenith in James Gillray's *Contemplations Upon A Coronet*, published following the death of Elizabeth Hamilton, Derby's first wife, in 1797. *Contemplations* is one of a number of graphic satires and stories that were published in response to Hamilton's illness and death. Farren sits in a luxurious dressing room reaching out to, but not yet touching, a coronet, which sits on top of a stand in the shape of Derby's head. The scene is theatrical; the plush green curtains evoke an auditorium and her pose, sitting at her dressing table, in the process of putting on a part, hints at her being an actress and is reminiscent of many dramatic scenes which take place in a Lady's dressing room, whilst also recalls the aristocratic women who similarly prepare for public display. The richness of the setting draws attention to Farren's wealth, at the centre of which is Derby. At the same time, the theatricality of the scene reminds the viewer that it is, like scenic decoration, a stage effect. Without Derby, Farren would only have props, not property.

Once again, the line between actress and aristocrat is blurred; 'Cosmetick', 'Bloom de Ninon' and pots 'For Bad Breath' litter the table to remind us that a woman on display (the actress, the society lady) paints herself to become an attractive figure, and that it is through this means that Farren ensnared an earl. The French-sounding products signal stereotypes about national approaches to beauty, in which the British prided themselves on the 'natural' look as opposed to the heavy makeup made fashionable in France.[64] Makeup was often associated with 'immoral' figures, such as prostitutes, re-igniting the connection between them and actresses. An actress could accrue wealth, but not a coronet. Gillray mocks the inequality between Derby and Farren in a map on the back wall entitled 'Map of the Road from Strolling Lane to Derbyshire Peak', and through the 'vive la egalite' written on the four-poster bed behind.

[64] Caroline Palmer, 'Brazen Cheek: Face-Painters in Late Eighteenth-Century England', *Oxford Art Journal,* 31 (2008), 197-213 (p. 198).

The text at the bottom reads:

> *CONTEMPLATIONS upon a CORONET;*_____ "A Coronet!_o bless my sweet little heart! __ Ah, it must be mine, now there's nobody left to hinder! And then,_hey, for my Lady Nimminney-pimmenney!_O, Gemmini! _ No more Straw Beds in Barns,_no more scolding mangers! & Curtseying to a dirty public!___but a Coronet upon my coach; Dashing at the Opera!_shining at the Court!_O dear dear! What shall I come to!"

There is much exaggeration here in her meditation on the difference between her old life and new life of luxury; Farren had long since escaped 'Straw beds in Barns' after all, though she had had several disputes (usually over pay) with managers. Gillray presents her as superior, disgusted by the 'dirty public' to whom she was subservient too in her profession, but being a Countess is not predicated on public support. The text is highly theatrical, a speech filled with expressions spoken by ladies Farren played, including 'O, Gemmini' a commonly used phrase said by many characters including Lady Plyant in Congreve's *The Double Dealer* (1693), in which Farren had appeared in the 1780s, and 'Nimminney-pimmenney', which recalls Burgoyne's *The Heiress* in which Farren had popularly played Lady Emily. Props and behaviour appear to be the mark of a lady; the coronet, attending the opera and Court signifying her upcoming status as a Countess, which again creates the impression that being an aristocrat is an appearance and an act that can be assumed –there is nothing natural. Gillray's satire refuses to let her be anything other than an actress.

Contemplations Upon A Coronet was part of the intense coverage of Farren and Derby in anticipation of and following Elizabeth Hamilton's death on 14 March 1797. One curious reaction is found in the *London Packet* (17-20 March 1797): 'Should Miss Farren retire from the stage, she must pay 300l. forfeit to the Managers of the Birmingham Theatre, for a breach of contract'. Whether or not this was the case (and she may well have been already engaged

for the upcoming summer season), drawing attention to the potential 'forfeit' serves to remind readers of how much Farren was about to gain.

Farren's final public appearance on stage was as Lady Teazle on 8 April 1797. Too overcome to speak, she could not deliver her farewell address, which was finally delivered by actor Richard Wroughton instead. The evening raised a considerable sum of money: £728 14s. 6d.[65] Within weeks, on 1 May, Farren was married and became the Countess of Derby. She did not appear on a public theatrical stage again – there were no cameos, guest appearances or returns by popular demands that Siddons undertook (and Hazlitt denounced). Instead, Farren made appearance on alternative public stages: first, as a bridesmaid for the Princess Charlotte, the Princess Royal, at her wedding to the Prince of Württemberg. In doing so, she was legitimated as a member of the aristocracy. In the graphic satires (Gillray's *The Bridal-Night* and Cruikshank's *The Wedding Night*) that followed the royal wedding Farren appears as a member of the aristocratic throng – only her characteristic height and thinness differentiates her from the other women featured.[66] A comic actress whose specialty was the town ladies who reflect social truths, rather than playing the fool, Farren had become, at long last, her parts.

The emphasis on Farren's fashionability and theatricality in visual and verbal satires during her career had challenged both her presumption to be considered amongst aristocratic women and the fundamental 'performance' that underpins aristocracy. The act of marriage transformed her into the Countess of Derby, and in so doing solidified the idea that to be an aristocrat was an act rather than a birth right. Felicity Nussbaum argues that it was not the fact that Farren was able to transcend class boundaries by marrying into the aristocracy that is striking, but it was 'the fact that it could ever be imagined as happening in real life that made

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[65] Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), v, p. 172.

[66] James Gillray, 'The Bridal-Night', 18 May 1797, BM Satires 9014; Isaac Cruikshank, 'The Wedding Night', 20 May 1797 BM Satires 9015.

the star actress both a curiosity and a formidable threat'.[67] A scurrilous pamphlet, *Memoirs of the Present Countess of Derby, late Miss Farren* (1797) was published by Petronius Arbiter, and was refuted by *The Testimony of Truth to the Exalted Merit, or a Biographical Sketch of the Countess of Derby*, published anonymously.[68] In attempting to quash rumour it fails because it stokes the fire of the first pamphlet – generating more editions of both. The popularity of these pamphlets is a testament to a culture enthralled by the secret lives of players, though the fact that is was used as source material into Farren's life, long into the twentieth century, speaks to the long-lasting impact of memoirs.

On exiting the stage, Farren maintained dignified silence – the ultimate disavowal of her acting career – and the embodiment of a town lady. Though described as the Queen of Comedy Farren never reached the dizzying heights of 'The Jordan' or 'The Siddons'. Nevertheless, she was essential to the Drury Lane company for two decades. Upon her marriage Farren left her theatrical life behind. As a result, there were no attempts to secure her reputation for posterity. Whilst Siddons (and her circle) evolved her celebrity into long-lasting fame, which necessarily involved revising one's life to fit a particular story, Farren did not. She sold her stake in celebrity for a place in the aristocracy. On her death, obituaries mentioned her former life as an actress, but otherwise she was afforded the respect due to her rank.

Just six months before Farren took leave of the stage, the *Monthly Mirror* pronounced her '*the Oldfield of the present day*'.[69] The short biography briefly traces Farren's theatrical history, accompanied by an engraving of her that 'is faithfully executed from a miniature in the possession of Mrs. Farren'. If this is true, it is perhaps a hint of some of the active ways in which Farren (and her mother) engaged the press; if so, it is the closest we come to knowing how Farren would have presented her history (including the claim that she was only fourteen

[67] Nussbaum, p. 47.
[68] Bloxam speculates that Richard Sheridan was the author of this defence (p. 173).
[69] *Monthly Mirror* (November 1796).

at the time of her Haymarket debut). After all, unlike many of her contemporaries, Farren left behind no memoir. Her marriage secured her status (financial and otherwise) and she had no need to sell herself – not even a print version – any longer.

CHAPTER 5: THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

The chapters on Siddons and Farren show the agency and the variety of the media coverage of two successful celebrities. Here I turn to the more ambiguous reception given to their contemporary Mary Wells (1762-1829). Born Mary Davies in Birmingham in 1762, Wells first appeared on the stage as a child, following the death of her father, Thomas Davies. She played in Birmingham and then in the West of England (Exeter, Bristol and Bath). She married fellow actor Ezra Wells in 1778, the Romeo to her Juliet, but he absconded shortly afterwards. She arrived in London in 1781, first playing at the Haymarket then at Drury Lane, before moving to Covent Garden in 1785. It was at the Haymarket that she first undertook her most famous role, that of the dairymaid Cowslip in John O'Keeffe's farce *The Agreeable Surprise* (1781). She maintained a strong line of business in low comedy roles, though she did attempt tragedy and from 1787 was celebrated as a mimic. From the mid-1780s Wells entered a high-profile relationship with writer Captain Edward Topham, with whom she had three children and lived happily until the early 1790s; she consciously overlapped art and life as she named their daughter Maria Cowslip and country home, Cowslip Hall. As well as writing plays and epilogues for Wells, Topham also launched a new newspaper, the *World*, that promoted her celebrity.

Despite the *World*'s outrageous puffs in support of Wells, her personal and professional life began to collapse in the early 1790s. She began an affair with another playwright, Frederick Reynolds, and rumours spread about her strange public behaviour. By 1793 she was no longer regularly employed by any theatre and shortly afterwards she was confined to the Fleet debtor's prison. Inside she converted to Judaism, renamed herself Leah and married (disastrously) for a second time in 1797 to a Moorish Jew, Joseph Sumbel. Though she appeared occasionally on stage, she never regained the notice she achieved in the 1780s. In 1811, she published *Memoirs*

of the Life of Mrs. Sumbel, late Wells, of the Theatres Royal Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and Haymarket, written by herself in a last attempt to secure her posthumous reputation. She died in obscurity in 1829.

Her rather unorthodox life and career has been recovered in recent scholarship, though she remains an outlier in the growing literature about eighteenth-century actresses. Laura Engel describes Wells's 'self-fashioning' of her 'notorious celebrity'.[1] Elizabeth Savage develops Engel's research to investigate the transgressive effect of Wells's mimicry on and offstage.[2] I revisit Wells's story here not only because she offers a compelling counterpoint to the successes of Siddons and Farren, but also because her complex relationship with the press warrants further investigation. Though Claire Knowles has recently scrutinised Wells's important role as co-editor of *The World*, a broader assessment of Wells's interaction with the press is as yet unexamined.[3] This chapter draws upon the research of Engel, Savage and Knowles, but shifts the attention away from Wells's activity to the presentation and reception of her in periodical culture. Her 'insider' status with the periodical press served to create and curate her reputation but may also have meant her eventual downfall.

Wells languished in the shadows of her more famous contemporaries, Siddons and Farren. Adam Rounce invites us to explore the value of the evidence about eighteenth-century literary 'failure' and I follow him in suggesting that that failure can sometimes illuminate the machinations of fame more clearly than those successful persons, who obscure the constructs underpinning their celebrity.[4] Moreover, Wells modelled many of her strategies for success on the career of Siddons, and to a lesser extent that of Farren, both on and off-stage, though it

[1] See ch. 3, 'Mary Wells's Notorious Celebrity', in Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, pp. 98-134.
[2] Elizabeth Savage, 'Making Mary: Imitation and Infamy in Eighteenth-Century Theater', *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research,* 30 (Summer and Winter 2015), 73-88.
[3] Claire Knowles, 'The Woman Behind the Man Behind the *World*: Mary Wells and the Feminisation of the Late-Eighteenth-Century Newspaper', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s,* ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 393-406.
[4] Adam Rounce, *Fame and Failure 1720-1800: The Unfulfilled Literary Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

yielded little long-term success for herself.[5] Between 1782-1785 they were working alongside each other at Drury Lane, but their lives and careers intersected in numerous ways. Consequently, the careers of Siddons, Farren and Wells often triangulated. However, I suggest that the two former actresses do not simply 'ghost', to borrow again Marvin Carlson's term, Wells's performances. Rather she summons them in attempts to bolster her own reputation. The difference lies in the involuntary or unintended echoes of earlier players, parts and performances that 'ghost' a new performance, whether desired or not, as opposed to deliberately conjuring those echoes.

SIMPLE AND NAIVE MRS. WELLS

Despite her unremarkable end, Wells's first London season (at the Haymarket and then immediately on to Drury Lane) was relatively successful for a debut player. Wells first appeared in London at the Haymarket on 1 June 1781 as Margery in Isaac Bickerstaffe's *Love in a Village* (1763) and Becky Cadwallader in Samuel Foote's *The Author* (1757). Prior to her London debut, a promotional paragraph appeared in the *London Courant* (30 May 1781) reporting her 'strong comic powers'. This was likely a kind of press release from the Haymarket to 'puff' the new member of the company. Advance notices are important; they remind us that theatregoers came to performances – even ones starring new players – with preconceptions shaped by the press.

As we have seen in previous chapters, newcomers were often subject to much press scrutiny: Wells was no exception. The *Public Advertiser* (2 June 1781) and *Morning Herald* (2 June 1781) reported that she and 'a young gentleman' [Mr. Marshall] – another newcomer – 'were received with very great applause', the *St. James's Chronicle* (31 May - 2 June 1781)

[5] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p.109-115.

predicted that 'when her *Manières* have acquired a little more Urbanity, [she] will be a very good Performer', and the *Whitehall Evening Post* (31 May - 2 June 1781) praised her 'pure *naiveté*', described her Becky Cadwallader as 'a very excellent piece of simplicity' and predicted that her 'comic powers will hereafter be highly entertaining to the public'. An extensive account appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* (2 June 1781), which introduces her as 'a beautiful young Actress…who has for some time past, been the Thalia of the West':

> She displayed a real comick genius; without running into extravagance, the common fault of provincial comedians, who are apt to mistake mummery for humour. The lady is very young and seems to possess many requisites for the theatre, that we have little doubt of her soon becoming a very valuable addition to the London stage.

The *Morning Chronicle* here favourably distinguishes Wells from the expectations of – or prejudices against – provincial players, but it also delineates her as a comic player. The other reviews too establish her 'simplicity' and '*naiveté*' that became a characteristic marker of Wells's subsequent performances.

Claire Knowles confidently asserts that Wells's London debut 'must have been a memorable performance'.[6] On a superficial level these reviews are positive, but as we have seen in discussing the London debuts of Siddons and Farren, it was commonplace to support newcomers, with the exception of truly disastrous first attempts. In comparison with the other reviews we have seen, therefore, there is little to suggest that the performance was particularly 'memorable', though clearly there was optimism that she had she potential to be a 'valuable addition'. In this respect Wells's reception was not unlike that of Farren before her. A more secure measure of her success than newspaper representation, is the fact that both Margery and Becky Cadwallader became part of her regular repertoire, established low comedy roles as her

[6] Knowles, p. 394.

primary line of business, and that at the end of the season she was engaged at Drury Lane.

Towards the end of the season, Wells undertook a new role that cast a long shadow over the rest of her career; Cowslip in John O'Keeffe's *The Agreeable Surprise* (1781) – a part she claimed he wrote with her in mind.[7] It was enormously successful, with an estimated 200 performances between 1781 and 1800.[8] Cowslip, though not a principal part, became a regular feature of Wells's repertoire and was closely associated with her throughout her life.

Cowslip is a rustic dairymaid who appears in the romantic subplot, opposite the 'crazy butler', Lingo (played by John Edwin).[9] The joke throughout is that her simplicity is more intelligible than Lingo's 'gibberish and nonsense'.[10] There is sexualised linguistic word play between them throughout; for example, Lingo plays upon her name in a clumsy pun that implies that she has the potential to 'slip': 'Cowslip, sit down. Your're [sic] a noun adjective, and must not stand by yourself'. So too there is much sexual innuendo that turns on the 'masculine', 'feminine' and 'neuter'. Cowslip is simple and pastoral, named from a common, wild, spring flower with a longstanding association with English folklore. It traditionally grows in abundance in fertile-rich pastures, 'tend[ing] to flower where a cow had 'slupped'.[11] The sexual ambiguity, coupled with her simplicity and rural charm, made Cowslip a hit.

Initial reviews praised the play, but there is little to suggest that Wells as Cowslip would become so popular – in fact there is a notable *lack* of commentary about her performance. Several newspapers, including the *London Chronicle*, *London Courant* and *Lloyd's Evening Post,* make no reference to Wells at all despite the fact they carried quite detailed summaries of the plot as a whole. *The Morning Chronicle* (5 September 1781) drew upon the character

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[7] Mary Wells, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Sumbel, Late Wells, Written by Herself*, 3 vols (London: C. Chapple, 1811), I, p. 43.
[8] Gillian Forrester, *John Edwin and Mrs. Mary Wells as Lingo and Cowslip in "the Agreeable Surprise" by John Downman: Curatorial Comment* (Yale Center for British Art, 2001-5), <http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1670958> [accessed 15 November 2015].
[9] Wells, I, p. 43.
[10] John O'Keeffe, *The Agreeable Surprise* (London: [s.n], 1784), II.2, p. 23.
[11] Plantlife,'Cowslip (Primula Veris)', (2010) <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/plant-fungi-species/cowslip> [accessed 15 November 2015]

Wells had developed over the season by commending 'the simplicity of Mrs. Wells'. The *Public Advertiser* (6 September 1781) described the 'great Propriety' of her performance: a minor comment, but one that anticipates Wells's subsequent close association with the part. 'Propriety' here no doubt means that, despite Cowslip's rustic sexual openness, she did not play it crudely. More significantly, 'propriety' also means the natural essence or characteristic qualities of a person, which implies a correctness in her portrayal: in short, she played the role properly.[12] Wells became the standard by which other actresses were judged in the part; when Sarah Wilson played as Cowslip at Covent Garden in November 1781 the *Public Advertiser* (26 November 1781) reported that though Wilson was a superior singer she 'wanted the Naiveté of Mrs. Wells as an Actress'. In short, Wilson did not capture the essence of Cowslip's character as Wells had done. Several years later Wells signalled her return to playing Cowslip in a puff in the *World*: 'Every *dramatic amateur* will rejoice in hearing that Mrs. WELLS is again to adorn the Haymarket Theatre. Thus, after an absence of two years, will the *real Cowslip* form there an AGREEABLE SURPRIZE [sic] to the public'.[13] This idea that Wells is the '*real Cowslip*', albeit promulgated here by the newspaper she had an active role in publishing, is an indication of the role of the press in conflating player and part.

Wells's 'proper' embodiment of Cowslip confirmed her identification with the low comedy parts. She continued in this line of business over the next few years, playing roles including Nancy in Sheridan's *The Camp*, Kitty Pry in *The Lying Valet*, Jenny in *The Gentle Shepherd*, Widow Brady in *The Irish Widow*. Her repertoire set the tone for her early press coverage; 'simplicity' and 'naiveté' became commonplace descriptors for Wells and her parts – the collapse between the character of player and part became central to Wells's celebrity identity. The *Morning Chronicle* (7 September 1784) reported 'much applause' for her Maud

[12] 'propriety, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152846?redirectedFrom=propriety#eid> [accessed 21 September 2018].
[13] *The World*, 5 May 1790.

in O'Keeffe's *Peeping Tom* due to her 'naiveté and good acting'; two years later the *Morning Post* (24 August 1786) wrote that she 'exhibited a degree of tender simplicity that highly interested the audience' as Lucy in Foote's *The Minor*. The language of simplicity and naiveté was particularly associated with the rusticity and charm of low comedy girls, in contrast to the polite and fashionable sociability of the 'town lady' types undertaken by Farren.

Simplicity, meaning artlessness, unaffectedness and sincerity, was praised as the antidote to the polite dissembling of the fashionable world. Less flatteringly, however, simplicity also meant unsophisticated, rustic and ignorant.[14] In *The Agreeable Surprise* O'Keeffe plays on the stereotype of simplicity as ignorance. There is a gendered dimension worth noting here; though men too could be praised for their 'simplicity', it was more commonly associated with women.[15] The desirability of 'simplicity' in women, points out a troubling sexual dimension to 'simplicity'. Simplicity was no guarantor of chastity; for example, Miss Prue in Congreve's *Love for Love* and Miss Hoyden in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* are sexually voracious, their 'simplicity' a mark only of their lack of exposure due to a country education. Once in the town, however, their 'simplicity' cannot last.[16] In *Evelina*, the heroine's understanding of Miss Prue's sexual knowingness whilst watching *Love for Love* is a cause for blushes – Evelina, a country girl too, is not so simple either.[17]

As well as a sexual dimension, 'simplicity' has repercussions for women's intelligence. In *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Mary Wollstonecraft describes the simplicity of heroine Maria, thus: 'There was a simplicity sometimes indeed in her manner, which bordered on infantine ingenuousness, that led people of common discernment to underrate her talents,

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[14] 'simplicity, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/179975?redirectedFrom=simplicity> [accessed 4 December 2018].
[15] The *World* (13 September 1788) claimed Exeter theatre manager and actor, Richard Hughes, could 'act in low Comedy with much humour and simplicity' and that same paper (1 June 1790) praised Thomas Blanchard for the 'simplicity in his acting that is perfectly true to nature'.
[16] William Congreve, *Love for Love*, ed. by M. M. Kelsall (London: A & C Black, 1999); John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse, or, Virtue in Danger*, ed. by Bernard Harris (London : New York: A. & C. Black ; W.W. Norton, 1986).
[17] Burney, *Evelina*, pp. 86-92.

and smile at the flights of her imagination'.[18] Whilst the appellation may have distinguished Wells from her polished, artificial contemporaries, it also led to her being overlooked for more serious parts and open for comments on her sexual availability. 'Simplicity' became a reigning epithet for Wells's career, and this was manifested both in her press coverage and in her parts. In particular, the actress Mary Wells began to be conflated with the part of Cowslip, an idea she simultaneously promoted and – confusingly – resisted.

CULTIVATING COWSLIP

The part of Cowslip began to ghost Wells's career in several ways. The following year she was cast as Slipshod in *The Female Dramatist* (1782), written by George Colman the Younger. It reunited Wells with John Edwin (the original Lingo in *The Agreeable Surprise*) who played another pretentious butler, Medley. Slipshod is the straightforward and simple chambermaid to the titular female dramatist, Mrs. Melpomene Metaphor, and her good sense is strikingly different from that of her mistress, whose literary pretensions occupy her mind.[19] There is an allusion here to Pope's 'slip-shod sibyl', a derogatory comment about a female poet, in *The Dunciad*, but also an unmistakeable reference to Cowslip: regular theatregoers would have recognised that Slipshod and Cowslip were played by the same actress.[20]

Wells's association with Cowslip accelerated offstage too and was fostered by references to the role in the press. Together with Topham, who she met in 1784, she contrived to promote Cowslip as part of Wells's 'brand'. Topham wrote several stage addresses and epilogues for Wells, several of which allude to Cowslip; these were printed in periodicals and

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[18] Wollstonecraft, I, p. 89.
[19] George Colman the Younger, *The Female Dramatist* (1782), on microfiche (London, British Library, MS Fiche 253/222), from unpublished manuscript (California, The Huntington Library, John Larpent Plays, LA598).
[20] Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, in *Alexander Pope Selected Poetry*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), III, l.15.

hence given greater exposure. Topham wrote several epilogues for notable leading ladies especially Elizabeth Farren. Graphic satirists poked fun at his prolific output, including 'The Moment of Imagination' (13 January 1785) and 'Captain Epilogue' (published at least twice on 5 October 1785 and 7 March 1786).[21]

Daniel J. Ennis and Judith Bailey Slagle, and Diana Solomon make the case for the significance of prologues and epilogues to the interpretation both of performances and as part of actresses' publicity arsenal.[22] Here, however, I am interested in 'print performances' of stage orations in the newspapers, which increased the audience for an address beyond those immediately in attendance. Print afterlives are another means by which the newspaper participated in celebrity culture, especially when an address turns on the character of the speaker. Reading a stage address in the newspaper differs from the experience of reading epilogues alongside each other in anthologies, such as *The Juvenile Roscius; or, Spouter's Amusement* (1770), *The British Spouter; or, Stage Assistant* (1773), and *The New Spouter's Companion* (1790). Whereas in anthologies speeches were read alongside each other, when printed in a newspaper they were read alongside advertisements, playbills, puffs, gossip and all other kinds of news that might affect the interpretation. For example, an 'Occasional Address', discussed below, delivered in April 1784 draws upon parliamentary language, at the very same time as the newspapers were filled with news about the General Election.

Topham's first speech for Wells was an 'Occasional Address' to introduce her as Isabella in David Garrick's (1717-1779) *Isabella; or, The Fatal Marriage* (1757) on 30 April 1784 for her benefit at Drury Lane.[23] She repeated the speech during the Haymarket season,

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[21] W. George (published by), *The Moment of Imagination* (BMSat 6840), 13 January 1785, etching on paper, 303 × 258 mm, British Museum, London; Thomas Rowlandson, *Captain Epilogue*, 5 October 1785, hand-coloured etching on paper, 270 × 188 mm, Royal Collection Trust. See also, version at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York published 7 March 1786.

[22] Diana Solomon, *Prologues and Epilogues of Restoration Theater: Gender and Comedy, Performance and Print* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013). Daniel James Ennis and Judith Bailey Slagle ed. *Prologues, Epilogues, Curtain-Raisers, and Afterpieces: The Rest of the Eighteenth-Century London Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007).

[23] An alteration of Thomas Southerne, *The Fatal Marriage; or, The Innocent Adulterer* (1694).

when she played Isabella for a second time, and it was also printed in several newspapers.[24] The speech presents Wells as a '*Comic* candidate' who is now 'in hopes to represent a tragic Borough', though she is 'unpractic'd', and calls for audience support. The political language captured the moment: the 1784 General Election was in progress. Yet Topham appears to mock the conceit at the same time – was an actress switching from comic to tragic parts really like crossing to the 'other side' of the benches?

In the second part Wells predicts that parts of the audience oppose Wells's attempt at tragedy and recall Cowslip:

> Say, will no kind good-natured freeman trace,
> Thro' bowls and daggers simple *Cowslip's* face?
> No learned Lingo of this lower school [*The Pit.*
> "Decline my parts, and think me out of rule?"
> Then when the storms of passion swell most high,
> When I shall rave and weep, run mad and die,
> Will not some voter on yon upper floor [*the Gallery.*
> Just as I'm falling, wish I'd stand no more,
> And in blunt, strong election language tell us,
> "*Cowslip for ever, d–n your Isabellas?*

Wells muses on whether the audience will see Cowslip in her Isabella – or demand Cowslip the comedy part in place of the tragic Isabella. In doing so, Wells presents the problem as the audience's problem, not her's. Counter-productively, alluding to Cowslip risked even closer association with the part. However, the entertainment value of Wells mentioning Cowslip potentially secured support for her benefit.

The epilogue makes manifest the ways a particular part, in this case Cowslip, 'ghosts', as Carlson terms it, the reception of other performances. I suggest that Wells's strong association with Cowslip was as much made in the news media, as in her on-stage performance. The speech provided Wells with legitimate space to canvass on behalf of herself to an audience,

[24] It was printed in the *Morning Chronicle*, 1 May 1784; *Morning Herald*, 1 May 1784; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 29 April 1784 - May 1, 1784; *Public Advertiser*, 3 May1784.

whilst its subsequent publication in newspapers enabled her defence to reach a wider readership.

The following year Topham wrote an epilogue to George Colman's *Turk and No Turk* (1785), which Wells delivered in the character of Cowslip. Her appearance was advertised as such in the playbills that were printed in the newspapers, the novelty perhaps drawing audiences to the new play. Here Wells took the 'ownership' of a part to another level; transporting Cowslip from her original setting and into the epilogue for a play in which Wells did not even appear. On the first night, 9 July 1785, Wells did feature in the after piece; not *The Agreeable Surprise* as one might expect, but rather, Horace Walpole's *Nature Will Prevail: A Dramatic Proverb* (1778), in which she took the part of another country girl, Finette.

Delivering the epilogue as Cowslip was clearly a gimmick, but it also provides a cogent response to the main piece, which concerns the fortunes of Ramble and his servant Presto. Disinherited, money dwindling and in need of a wife, Ramble returns to England in the habit of a 'Turk'. He eventually marries Emily, daughter of Sir and Lady Simple, and is restored to his inheritance by his father, Sir Roger. The elaborate conceit of Cowslip, the paragon of English country simplicity, as speaker of the epilogue, counterpoints the exoticism presented and mimicked in the play. But whilst the epilogue ostensibly focuses on promoting *Turk and No Turk* it is (unsurprisingly) self-serving too. Cowslip recounts her journey from the west of England to London, 'to be raised in the east–like some folks from the north' which recalls the journeying within the play itself (Sir and Lady Simple have travelled from Cheshire to London before the start of the play and Ramble, of course, had travelled to the East before returning to England).

But Cowslip's journey is also a rehearsal of Wells's own journey to London, since she had previously appeared on the stage in the west of England and then travelled east to London to make her name in the metropolis. Celebrity culture encouraged an interest in these highly

constructed moments when the audience appear to glimpse the *real* actress. As celebrity culture increased, new kinds of writing emerged. Though epilogues had a long history of promoting a new play, this kind of epilogue, one more focused on promoting the speaker than promoting the play, is surely linked to nascent celebrity. Betsy Bolton suggests that 'in prologues and epilogues, the appeal to celebrity effectively punctured the fiction of the actor being coextensive with the character performed'.[25] Here, however, Topham plays up to the fiction and blurs the triumvirate roles of Wells-the-public-figure, Cowslip and the epilogue-speaker. Wells stages this triptych simultaneously; making it difficult to unpick where Cowslip ends, and Wells begins.

Topham's epilogue for Cowslip/Wells, was printed in several newspapers and also reviewed; the *Morning Herald* (11 July 1785) claimed it 'was a poor composition, and was spoken very indifferently by Mr. [Sic] Wells'; the *Morning Chronicle* (11 July 1785) was hardly more favourable: '[It] had several good points in it; but it did not, upon the whole, produce that effect which, in all probability, was expected from it'; and the *Morning Post* (11 July 1785) complained that it 'had neither point nor allusion to the piece'. A favourable review appeared in the *Public Advertiser* (11 July 1785): 'To the speaking too much commendation cannot be paid—and has placed COWSLIP on a line with the best Epilogue speaker of the stage—*Miss Farren*—and who certainly before had not an equal'.[26] Wells here is entirely conflated with Cowslip. More praise appeared again in the *Public Advertiser* the following day:

> The *fair* COWSLIP seems alone to have met with untarnished praise: A better Epilogue—and we say so— even if it was *Mr. Topham's*—might have been written by himsel [sic]—but better speaking could not have been found.—Modest—discriminating—forcible and to a syllable articulate.—Good news this, to you future Epilogue-mongers of Covent-Garden—and provide yourselves

[25] Betsy Bolton, 'Theorizing Audience and Spectatorial Agency', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832,* ed. by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 31-52 (p. 44).
[26] *General Evening Post,* 9-12 July 1785; *Whitehall Evening Post,* 9-12 July 1785; *Morning Herald,* 12 July 1785; *Morning Chronicle,* 11 July 1785; *Public Advertiser,* 12 July 1785.

accordingly.[27]

The comments here blur the lines between promoter and commentator, simultaneously praising Wells whilst also insinuating her availability as potential speaker for hack writers, inviting them to write for her specifically.

In another epilogue, to Lady Wallace's *The Ton; Or, The Follies of Fashion* (1788), written by Topham and spoken by Wells, she did not play Cowslip but the conflation of actress and part in terms of their character(istics) continues. Topham discharged the primary duty of promoting the play before using the speech to introduce Wells's imitations. The final stanza opens with the couplet: 'Now for myself some pity I shou'd wake, / Unskill'd unpractised in the task I take'. This is the same conceit Topham used previously to induce support for Wells's Isabella. Wells presents herself as a 'Weed' invading a fine theatrical garden, as indeed the character of Cowslip outshone that of the principal lady, Laura, as the main spectacle in *The Agreeable Surprise*:

> Here, where the pow'rs of finish'd speakers shine,
> How silly was it to make choice of mine!
> Of me, a weed, unknown to Rhet'ric's flow'rs,
> A simple cowslip in these fragrant bow'rs.
> What can I do? but rest my hopeless aims
> On imitative arts and borrow'd names:
> Call to your eyes delights you oft have felt,
> And try with copy'd charms to please and melt.

She humbles herself before the audience and emphasises her inferiority in a possible attempt to disguise the subversive nature of her act. Unlike in previous addresses in which Wells employed the rhetoric style and language of politicians, here she disavows 'Rhet'rick's flowers' and affirms her status as 'A *simple* Cowslip'. Wells embraces her 'simplicity' as a riposte to artifice, in order to implore the audience's sympathy, though ironically the epilogue is a model

[27] *Public Advertiser*, 12 July 1785.

of her oratorical skill – indeed her Isabella introduction was a kind of political speech. The claim that she is 'unknown to Rhet'ric's flow'rs' is either disingenuous given that she had several years' experience performing in London, or alternatively, an ironic joke at her lack of success and recognition despite self-promotion and exposure: though a regular in London she remained 'unknown'. The *London Chronicle* (8-10 April 1788) praised the conceit: 'The allusion to a simple Cowslip was prettily introduced, and as delicately managed in the delivery' and Miles Peter Andrews recycled the weed metaphor to introduce Wells's expanded show, *Dramatic Imitations.*[28] These speeches simultaneously reinforced Wells's identification with Cowslip and, by introducing new acts, presented her as growing out of these kinds of roles.

The weed is an unwanted, invasive plant that competes for resources with the established (cultivated) flowers. A weed, of course, is not a plant type in itself; a plant that is a weed in one context is not a weed in another. Read as an economic metaphor for competing acts and stages: weeds takeover – and so will Wells. Though she complains that she is reduced to the 'imitative arts' to achieve her 'hopeless aims' for theatrical stardom, there is an underlying riposte to those who criticise mimicry. Mimicry may not be a weed but a legitimate plant in the theatre; after all, 'Imitative Arts, and borrow'd Names' are the twin pillars of the acting profession: to play a queen in a legitimate drama is still to imitate real queens.

The use of Cowslip as a vehicle for Wells's celebrity draws attention to those eighteenth-century writing practices, documented by David Brewer, which created possibilities for characters beyond their original setting. It was by no means an unusual practice, but a widespread trend described by Brewer as 'imaginative expansion' in which 'the characters in broadly successful texts were treated as if they were both fundamentally incomplete and the common property of all'.[29] Characters were not confined to their original texts and could be

[28] *European Magazine*, vol. 13 (May 1788), p.371.
[29] David A. Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 2.

enjoyed by readers, writers and audiences across genres and media. There are many high-profile examples including Samuel Richardson's sequel to *Pamela* (1740), *Pamela in her Exalted Condition* (1742), and the reappearance of the character Tony Lumpkin from Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) in John O'Keeffe's *Tony Lumpkin in London* (1778).

The popularity of *The Agreeable Surprise* induced various kinds of 'afterlives' for the characters in new farces, monologues and epilogues – unrelated, except for the familiarity of characters, to the original work. There were new dramas, for example, *Lingo's Wedding* (1784) submitted to the Lord Chamberlain but apparently never staged, which sees Lingo, now a school teacher, too superior for the lowly Cowslip, persuade widow Mrs Tickle-Text to marry him. Another, *Lingo's Wedding: or, the Vicar and Moses. A Burletta* (1789), staged at the Royal Circus, reinstates Cowslip, though neither Wells nor Edwin appeared in that production. A song from this production, 'Lingo's Triumph', performed by Mr. Davis at the Royal Circus was printed in the *Public Advertiser* (11 June 1787). Like Wells, Edwin too sought to capitalise on its popularity: he wrote and performed a monologue "Lingo's Opinion on Men and Manners (a Comical, Whimsical, Farcical Rhapsody)" for his Covent Garden benefit on 10 April 1787, which was then performed on three other occasions (17 April 1787; 28 August; 27 September 1788). As well as advertising and commentating on live performance, the newspaper was also a site for other kinds of 'imaginative expansion'; for example, shortly after the first production one newspaper correspondent styled himself 'Domine Lingo'.[30] Though Edwin wrote his own material we should not immediately think there is more empowerment for the male player evidenced here. Wells had a direct link to a newspaper editor after all. Perhaps, without Wells's promotion of Cowslip, Edwin would not have been able to capitalise on Lingo.

The newspaper, as the case of Wells shows, was a dynamic site in literary and theatrical

[30] *London Courant,* 28 September 1781.

culture; it provided a crucial site for engagement beyond a performance, both through advertising and mediating the live event, and as a space of 'imaginative expansion'. Wells's 'brand' of low comedy parts was cultivated not only through her onstage performances, but also through the newspapers' presentation and circulation of her. Despite the popularity of *The Agreeable Surprise* and the role of Cowslip, Wells's 'brand' had limitations. Her low comedy roles were rarely the principal part. As Elaine McGirr suggests 'the country maid was the antidote for the refined and artificial town lady, but at the same time, […] there was no place for her in the real world of modern, commercial, and polite society'.[31] The elision with Cowslip compromised Wells's claims to be a serious actress. Unlike Siddons or Farren, Wells struggled to become a 'Queen' of Drury Lane, in part because her line of business limited her to secondary – albeit popular – parts.

Evidence that Wells was dissatisfied with the expectations of the 'simple' maid role appears in Topham's farce *The Fool* (1785), written as a vehicle for Wells who played the titular fool, Laura. Laura is a simple rustic wife who irritates her new husband, Beaumont, because he believes her to be 'a damn'd fool'.[32] At the end it is revealed that the simple, rustic persona was an act put on by Laura to test her husband's belief that 'excess of fondness was preferable even to better sense in the character of a wife; I have yielded to your system: now tell me whether I am to be the fool or not?'.[33] Laura's dissembling also leads her to uncover the unscrupulous behaviour of the Abbe, who designs to scam Beaumont. At its crudest level the farce hazards against underestimating women. The joke with Cowslip is that her simplicity offers greater insights than Lingo's faux intellectualism; with Laura her simplicity is a disguise. She performs simplicity in order to save the day but is not a 'simpleton'. Perhaps there is an attempt here by Topham to create new possibilities for the 'rustic simpleton' – usually

[31] McGirr, p. 106.
[32] Edward Topham, *The Fool* (London: John Strahan, 1786), I.3, p. 27.
[33] Ibid, II.2, p. 43-44.

compromised by town life and sent back into the country. The intention is clear: to read Wells as 'simple' is to misread her.

Wells's vexed celebrity was in part due to her ambiguous 'brand'; on the one hand she embraced her conflation with Cowslip, but on the other she attempted to expand her repertoire to include tragic parts, which conflict with the 'simplicity' and 'naiveté' of her public profile. Wells (and Topham) clearly worked hard to secure her identity with Cowslip. But the effect would have been limited without newspapers spreading and reinforcing the connection. I do not claim that the newspaper ensured success (indeed her ill success in tragedies despite media support testifies to this), but it was a powerful medium through which celebrity identities could be presented, even if not ultimately accepted by the public. What follows traces the media role in and response to her candidacy for tragedy.

WELLS, THE *MORNING CHRONICLE* AND TRAGEDY

Topham was not the only newspaperman who trafficked Wells' celebrity. In her *Memoirs*, Wells remembers that William Woodfall 'instigated' her attempts at tragedy.[34] Woodfall was the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* and also had a share in the *Public Advertiser*, which was edited by his brother, Henry Sampson Woodfall. It was in the *Morning Chronicle* that Woodfall pioneered both theatrical and parliamentary reporting, before going on to establish *The Diary or Woodfall's Register* in 1789. Though we should be mindful that paragraphs that appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* were, like others, often paid for as puffs, the *Morning Chronicle* was broadly sympathetic to her, especially concerning her attempts in tragedy. Here I scrutinise Wells's claim that Woodfall 'instigated' her tragic candidacy by following the *Morning Chronicle*'s (actual) representation of her tragic appearances.

[34] Wells, I, pp. 26-27.

On 30 April 1783 Wells first appeared in a tragedy in London, as Jane Shore in Nicholas Rowe's (1674-1718) *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1714). Though Siddons was the leading tragedienne at this point, having returned to Drury Lane six months previously, players had more scope for benefit performances to choose roles otherwise 'owned' by someone else. It is worth pointing out that Wells had not attempted tragedy before Siddons's triumphant return. We might speculate that Wells saw the potential for tragic parts only following Siddons's unprecedented success and celebrity in these roles.

The *Morning Chronicle* (30 April 1783) published a lengthy paragraph in advance of her performance in support: 'The attempt is a bold one, but it deserves encouragement'. The reviewer (Woodfall) acknowledges that he is 'stimulated by a desire to do all in his power to promote the cultivation of theatrical abilities in this hour of their dearth, steps so far forward from his character of commentator, on what has passed on the stage'. Though confident in the 'candour of the publick', he implores her fellow players to 'remember, how much depends on reciprocal assistance in the representation of every play; let them feel in sympathy for the arduous task a comic actress prescribes herself, when, for the first time, she attempts a tragedy character, and let them do their utmost to give her an opportunity of having, in every sense of the words, a *fair trial*'. This is a clever rhetorical trick: Wells's failure can be ascribed to poor support.

Though a promotional piece for Wells, it also exposes Wells's troubles with the rest of the Drury Lane company and therefore, despite Woodfall's authoritative theatrical criticism, his paper nevertheless benefitted from circulation of gossip. Though the paragraph opens declaring it was a 'bold' decision, it closes by suggesting that it was a risk-free attempt because if she fails 'she will still remain an admirable *comic* actress; should she prove as fortunate as she deserves, the theatre will have her as an able performer both in tragedy and comedy; her cause therefore is for the moment the cause of the publick'.

The *Morning Chronicle* (1 May 1783) offered the most sustained criticism, lamenting that Wells appeared 'before so ill-filled a house' and consequently she began 'rather cold and dispirited in her manner'. Things improved and she 'drew down as much applause as her scanty auditory could bestow'. Though sympathetic, the reviewer is not exaggerated in praise: 'To say, that she played the character of Jane Shore capitally, would be to contradict what we have already premised'. The review signals the intention to be just in his account (at odds, perhaps, with the lack of fair trial Wells has received). He goes on to praise her 'correctness, propriety, and pathetic power' and contends that 'her talents for tragedy are far from contemptible'. Hardly overwhelming support, but such restrained praise is in contrast with the general content of 'puffs' or outrageous invectives. Nevertheless, Woodfall's sympathies are clear and support Wells's claim that he 'instigated' her pursuit of tragedy.

Siddons's presence dominated Drury Lane tragedy at this time, ghosting the performance of Wells. The reviewer suggests that Wells's 'voice nearly resembles the best parts of that of Mrs. Siddons' and not only emphasises her superiority over Siddons's sister, Miss Kemble, but also suggests that, with a little teaching, Wells could be 'as good an actress in tragedy, as any on the stage, supposing Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Crawford, and Mrs. Yates to be out of the question'. This is not unqualified praise. The reviewer does not suggest she could quite rival this triptych of tragediennes who dominated the stage but certainly presents Wells as a potentially convincing secondary player.

The following day a curious notice appeared in the 'To our Correspondents' column: 'An Impartial Spectator's *letter on the performance of* Jane Shore, *on Mrs. Wells's night, is received, but we cannot possibly make room for theatrical disquisition, when so much important parliamentary business is coming on'.*[35] This comment forestalls any further debate on Wells's performance as Jane Shore, ostensibly in order to reserve space for parliamentary

[35] *Morning Chronicle,* 2 May 1783.

news. But given the packed nature of the newspapers, and the frequent correspondence on theatrical matters and the reasonably lengthy space given over to Wells in the first place, it suggests that the *Morning Chronicle* might have suppressed more inflammatory remarks.

The *Morning Chronicle* was not the sole newspaper to comment on Wells's performance. The *Morning Post* (1 May 1783) reported the 'universal approbation of her auditors', claimed she played the 'very arduous character of *Shore* ... In the Siddonian manner from the beginning to the end' and delivered the verdict that 'Mrs. Wells, with some necessary instructions, would prove a second to that distinguished luminary, Mrs. Siddons'. The *Post* also suggested that Wells suffered from the audience's opinion that she was 'naturally a comic actress' and 'a certainty of the audience drawing *comparisons* which could not operate in her favour'. By contrast, the *Public Advertiser* (1 May 1783) criticised Wells's performance as 'very flat and spiritless–A Copy, and no more, / Of something better we have seen before'.

Wells had no other opportunities to play tragic parts until her next Drury Lane benefit, the following year. This time, a series of 'teaser' paragraphs appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* well in advance of her appearance as Isabella, not unlike 'teaser trailers' for new films. Raising interest in benefits was particularly important as it provided additional income to a player's regular salary. On 15 March 1784 a 'female correspondent' remembers Wells as Jane Shore and 'much wishes that that accomplished actress will again chuse [sic] for her benefit a Tragedy; as her forte is certainly the pathetic' and goes to complain that Wells 'has been so much neglected by the Managers' because they have passed over Wells for other actresses 'who had neither her powers, voice, nor feelings, nor any way equal to them' for the 'secondary' tragic parts. Then, on 17 April 1784, a correspondent praised Wells's decision to act again in tragedy as she previously gave 'ample proof of her ability'. And again, on 24 April 1784 a paragraph in Wells's favour claims 'that she will succeed is beyond a doubt, her actions, attitudes, and elocution, are superior to those of many, and infinite to those of few performers

on the present stage'. The emphasis of these 'puffs' is both on Wells's superiority to other actresses and her suitability for tragic parts in particular; they trail her upcoming performance (with increasingly frequency) and shape expectations by 'remembering' on behalf of the public her skill at Jane Shore the previous year – despite the variable praise at the time.

On the day of the performance, 30 April 1784, the paper once again came out in support of Wells by acknowledging the difficulty of her task: 'This evening Mrs. Wells quits the light skiff, in which she has so often been safely waster over the smooth streams of Comedy and Farce to venture on board a bark, that braves the stormy Sea of Tragedy'. Though Siddons is mentioned for having 'first exhibited her uncommon powers' as Isabella to the London public, the emphasis shifts to the onus on the audience to accept Wells. Though it is an 'arduous' task to succeed Siddons, the reviewer writes, 'the candour of the publick is not exceeded by the difficulty' and rounds off by asserting that 'there can be no doubt but her endeavours of this evening will be favourably received'.

The 'trails' worked: on 1 May 1784, the day after the performance, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that unlike the scant and unenthusiastic audience the previous year, this time Wells 'was so favourably received, that were we to found our opinion solely on the proportion of applause bestowed by the Theatre, we should be warranted in pronouncing her performance little inferior to that of Mrs. Siddons in the same character'. Here is where the *Morning Chronicle* makes a perhaps unexpected move:

> but unwelcome as the task may occasionally prove, it is our office at all times to detect popular error, and state the truth; and in the present case, we do not feel inclined to shrink from our duty, because we are not only conscious, that Mrs. Wells is bountifully gifted by nature with talents for tragedy, but because, having a rooted conviction, that, with judicious instruction on the one hand, and due pains, attention and assiduity on the other, she may be rendered as deservedly the favourite of the town in the service of Melpomene, as she already most confessedly stands their favourite in the service of Thalia: it would defeat the object of our hope were we, in a mad zeal for our purpose, to consent to be blind to her

> faults, and to lend our voice of approbation to that of an audience, that applauded in general extravagantly, and, for the most part, erroneously.[36]

Despite the paper's publication of puffs in advance of the performance, the review here demonstrates Woodfall's role in the development of genuine theatrical criticism, which should not be discredited as 'puffing', although elements of exaggeration remain. It is doubtful whether Wells can be said to have been the town's 'favourite in the service of Thalia'. Nevertheless, the review is measured and draws attention to the growing distinction between a sense of 'popular' and 'critical' opinion.

The review continues by signalling Wells's natural 'qualifications': 'a beautiful and expressive countenance, a figure far from bad, and a voice at once sweet, powerful, and pathetic'. She is presented as a rival to the foremost players of the day – at times: 'In those pathetic passages which she delivered rightly, she harrowed up the soul, and was mistress of the feelings of all who heard her', but this served only to make the 'palpable blots' more obvious. There were some major errors; for example, she 'erred' in her speech, which 'marred Isabella's meaning', and was 'too precipitate and too faint throughout'. The tone shifts suddenly away from theatrical criticism to theatrical gossip: the reviewer reports 'the difficulty that occurred in the course of yesterday, with regard to getting any performer to undertake the part of Nell in the Camp', and 'to that circumstance solely we ascribe her not having performed the character of Isabella in a manner equal to our expectations'.

Overall the reviewer declares that 'she has yet much to learn', though despite her 'imperfections ... we make no scruple to pronounce her a most promising tragic actress'. It is the managers, however, who must act:

> if the managers of Drury Lane theatre know their own interest, they will not suffer her talents for tragedy to be "buried in a napkin," but

[36] *Morning Chronicle,* 1 May 1784.

> will encourage her to cultivate them assiduously, and by frequent exercise to acquire a more correct mode of delivery, a more easy and picturesque stile [sic] of action and attitude, and a more graceful carriage and deportment.

The need for Wells to learn or be instructed in tragedy – to develop her natural talent – on the surface simply registers her deficiency, and yet, this theme has run through much of the *Morning Chronicle*'s responses to Wells as a tragedienne and is the more serious charge upon which the critical voice turns: Wells needs to be given a chance to develop, which she is not being given. So, whilst the support is not exaggerated praise, the *Morning Chronicle* provides something of a subtler kind than the 'puff': a challenge to the stronghold particular players had over parts and managers' lack of developing talent in favour of their leading ladies.

Despite calls from the press for Wells to have 'frequent exercise' and the measured argument presented in the *Morning Chronicle*, Wells was given no such opportunity. Perhaps it is no surprise that, following her next essay as Isabella (at the Haymarket on 5 August 1784), the *Morning Chronicle* (6 August 1784) printed a short partisan review in place of the (lengthy) measured criticism above; she was 'beyond all expectation', 'chaste, animated, and energetick [sic]', and the paper declared 'If this actress, is not brought forward in tragedy in the course of the winter, the managers know not their own interest'. The positive campaign in the *Morning Chronicle* continued the following week when Wells appeared in another tragic part as Lady Randolph in John Home's *Douglas* (1756). On 10 August the paper reported 'most sanguine expectations' and predicted that a successful performance would make her 'decidedly second to Siddons' and then the following day another paragraph appeared, which addresses the challenge of introducing an established comedian as a tragedienne:

> Strange as the assertion may on the first blush of it appear, the sterling merit of Mrs. Wells, as an actress, has operated as a check to the extension of her fame; in other words, if it had not been known that she was one of the most original and excellent Comedians of the present day, so much doubt would not have been

> entertained of her powers in tragedy. But it was so natural to compliment Mrs. Wells with the supposition that the incomparable representative of Cowslip was "to the manor born," and that it could not be, that she could arrest our attention and applause in Isabella, we wonder not at the incredulity of the town at first, and its unwillingness to credit the round assertion we early hazarded, that Mrs. Wells was equally gifted by Nature with faculties for tragedy, as she confessedly possessed abilities for comedy. Mr. Topham's well adapted address led the way to the detection of popular error; and experience, the touchstone of truth, has supported our prediction, and confirmed it completely. The Lady Randolph of Mrs. Wells, we trust, will strengthen the publick conviction of her tragic talents, and, if after that, the Winter Managers do not advantage themselves of her various qualifications, to stand eminently forward in their groupe [sic] of performers of both kinds, they will deserve to be marked as the dullest dunces, that ever blundered out of the beaten road, and mistook their functions.[37]

This paragraph favourably presents Wells's struggle for public acceptance as a tragedienne as a compliment to her judicious skills as a comic player – attempting to reconcile these two identities which were broadly divided in the patent theatre companies by the end of the century (earlier in the century we find much more traffic between 'types' and in provincial companies, where the pool of players was smaller, players were needed in all kinds of parts).

The *Morning Chronicle*'s paragraphs demonstrate the kind of support that could be offered by newspapers as a kind of early media campaign, both in overt 'puffs' and paragraph trails that help to stoke up interest, but also in more sincere criticism. We have also seen the paper act as a cultural memory bank, recalling previous performances and reminding the reader how they should remember it, mediating the past as well as the present performance. In Wells's case this could both help and hinder the development of her repertoire. The newspapers both frustrated and enhanced her 'brand'; it helped to cultivate her as Cowslip within the public imagination, but this complicated her attempts to transition into tragedy.

Complicating the *Morning Chronicle*'s presentation of Wells as a tragic player was her

[37] *Morning Chronicle,* 11 August 1784.

continuing appearance in the comic types that made her name. So, at the Haymarket in 1784, alongside these tragic parts, Wells continued to undertake 'simple' parts such as Cowslip, Becky Cadwallader and Maud in new O'Keeffe afterpiece *Peeping Tom* (1784), which saw her reunited with Edwin. Wells's presentation in the *Morning Chronicle* regarding tragic parts tells only one small part of her relationship with that particular paper and with the media. We do not know how closely people followed one particular news story or even one paper. Periodicals were at once a site in which a player could exercise agency and insert a puff paragraph (or be the object of favour of an editor), but this could equally be counteracted by a rival paragraph in another paper.

Whilst the *Morning Chronicle* worked quite hard to raise Wells's reputation as a tragedienne, the 'simple' and 'naive' Wells cannot be found in these paragraphs. The *Morning Post* (14 August 1784) published a single line that could remind readers of her predilection for comedy. Discussing the seasonal players at Brighthelmstone [Brighton], the paper claimed of Mrs. Wilson '*Cowslip* is her first character here, though she is by no means equal to Mrs. Wells in that part'. The mixed messages caused by Wells's repertoire, accompanied by the various impressions of her presented in the papers disavows any sense that an actress could have a unified public persona; multiple newspapers produced various kinds of presentations – often conflicting – that could not always be reconciled, at least when presented together.

The different language used to present Wells as comedienne or tragedienne reveals the extent to which an actress's public image was contingent on her repertoire. Surveying a single paper's response to an actress over a period of several months offers only a fragment of her presentation in the media, but it also exposes the inconsistencies that can only be multiplied when we think of a broader, more multi-faceted press. The *Morning Chronicle*'s critique of role ownership, which served in Wells's case to hinder her progress in the tragic line, points towards a larger conversation about management practices that played out throughout the

century.

The singular support of the *Morning Chronicle* failed to gain traction: Siddons's predominance at Drury Lane remained, and so Wells transferred to Covent Garden on 14 December 1785, playing the part of Jane Shore once again. That season not only did she play Isabella and Lady Randolph again, but also Andromache in Ambrose Phillips's *The Distress'd Mother* (1712) – all parts associated with Siddons. Though she was not universally panned in the press, it appears that a combination of her too strong association with Cowslip, as well as other 'simple' parts, and Siddons's embodiment of the tragic muse herself resulted in Wells's failure to secure tragic roles in future seasons despite the change of company. Though she occasionally played tragic roles, she returned to the comic line. From 1787 she was also celebrated as a mimic. Whilst there had been several notable male mimics, including Samuel Foote and Tate Wilkinson, Wells's imitations were novel, as well as apparently 'inimitable'.[38] She mimicked many contemporary actresses including Elizabeth Billington, Ann Cargill, Ann Crawford, Dora Jordan and Mary Ann Yates, but her most famous imitation was of Siddons playing Isabella. Through her imitations Wells finally found her 'unique theatrical commodity', which through impersonating her contemporaries, paradoxically distinguished her from them.

The press responses to Wells as Siddons as Isabella are worth noting here. Whilst some periodicals praised her imitation, others discouraged mimicry altogether. *The European Magazine*, for example, denounced mimicry as 'a species of entertainment of little value when given in the best manner, and deserves no encouragement'.[39] The *St. James's Chronicle* suggested 'That laboured and extravagant Commendations we had seen of Mrs. Wells's Imitations, had left Doubt and Incredulity on our Minds', which evinces the dangers that puffery could backfire, but upon seeing her imitations concluded 'The Imitation is just, forcible

[38] Kitty Clive mimicked famous lawyers as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, see Fisher, pp. 23-25.
[39] *European Magazine*, vol. 13 (May 1788), p. 371.

and chaste; and Mrs. Siddons might greatly Benefit by the Lesson it holds up to her'.[40] The idea that Wells out 'Siddonsed' Siddons was repeated in praise of Wells – or denunciation of Siddons. Such praise, of course, was ambiguous: good enough to pretend to be Siddons, but not to be a tragedienne. Wells's interaction with newspapers did not stop with being a subject; what follows assesses her involvement with the *World*.

WELLS AND THE *WORLD*

On 1 January 1787 a new paper, the *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, was launched.[41] It was founded by veteran publisher John Bell, who had recently sold his interest in the *Morning Post,* and Edward Topham, Wells's lover and author of the epilogues she delivered in the role of Cowslip. The Reverend Charles Este was editor and there were several notable contributors including Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Elizabeth Inchbald. By the third issue (3 January 1787) the editors already claimed that their letterbox was 'overflowing' with correspondence. In its early days the editors claimed a circulation of around 3,000-4,000 copies sold, dropping to 2,000 or less in 1790.[42] Whilst scepticism about such claims is essential, it was nevertheless a major newspaper at the close of the 1780s.

The *World* eschewed the parliamentary reporting that dominated other popular presses, like Woodfall's *Morning Chronicle*. Instead it focused on social and cultural 'news', and gossiped extensively about men and women of fashion. The paper had many popular sections. In particular, the Della Cruscan poetry it printed resulted in a kind of poetic soap opera.[43] Readers eagerly awaited the poetic exchanges between 'Della Crusca' (Robert Merry) and 'Anna Matilda' (Hannah Cowley) in particular. Some were not impressed: when Anna Seward

[40] *St. James's Chronicle,* 10-12 April 1788.
[41] It dropped the subtitle from 27 November 1797.
[42] Werkmeister, p. 202.
[43] See Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality*, pp. 68-94.

thanked Hester Thrale Piozzi for alerting her to the Della Cruscan poetry she claimed, 'but for your recommendation I should probably never have read them, being inserted into a magazine into which there is no looking without being shocked by some outrage or other against genius or worth'.[44] In the same moment that Seward disavows reading the *World*, however, she betrays her knowledge of its content. Nevertheless, the same contentious features that apparently repelled Seward, however, contributed to its popularity. Its focus on the 'fashionable world', outside the sphere of many readers, made the lives of real people a form of entertainment in itself.

Though, as we will see, the *World* did puff Wells, I concur with Annibel Jenkins's conclusion that this was not the sole reason for its existence.[45] Even if it was Topham's intention, it was not John Bell's, who desired to remain in newspaper publishing following his departure from the *Morning Post*.[46] Either way, the *World* enjoyed wide cultural purchase beyond Wells. Indeed, for the first three months the paper barely mentioned her at all, likely because she was off-stage following the birth of a daughter in January 1787.[47] Nonetheless, whilst many actresses had support from particular newspapers or editors, and it was commonplace to pay for paragraphs to appear, Wells's closeness to a paper was unusual – perhaps unrivalled among her fellow female players.

Before turning to Wells's representation in the *World*, let us first consider what role she played in its creation. She claims in her *Memoirs* that she was not only a part of the editorial team, but also directed it in Topham's absence: 'the principal burden of carrying it [the *World*] fell at last upon my shoulders'.[48] She includes letters apparently from Topham (though not her

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[44] Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward, Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, ed. by Archibald Constable, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1811), II, p. 53.
[45] Annibel Jenkins, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), p. 245.
[46] Knowles, p. 393.
[47] *Morning Herald,* 17 January 1787.
[48] Wells, I, p. 59.

replies) in which he affectionately calls her 'pud', but the content is largely business: he asks her to '*take care of* THE WORLD', 'THANK *Este* for the introduction to Parliament; and desire that a proof may be shewn to you […] of the ode, that it may be printed correctly', and gives 'credit' to her for news that there were 2,600 copies sold the previous Friday'.[49] Whatever the actual extent of Wells's involvement – and her presentation of many things is highly suspect – it is likely that she was a key contributor.

Women working in the periodical press were not uncommon. In fact, the first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant,* was originally owned by a woman, Elizabeth Mallet (fl. 1672–1706), albeit only for the first ten issues. Women's participation in news culture, not only as consumers and readers, but also as makers, has been largely overlooked. The predominance of men in print media has overshadowed the extent of women's involvement, so that their story has been understood as only a minor contribution to an otherwise masculine world.

Where women's contribution has been half-remembered, it has been plagued both by the view that such examples are exceptional and by reductive readings of women-authored works such as *The Female Tatler* (1709-1711) or *The Female Spectator* (1744-1746), as reactionary or derivative of the male model, which frustrates attempts to view the texts on their own terms. Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell's recent collection, *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s*, recovers women's role in eighteenth-century periodical culture and challenges gendered assumptions about both writing and reading practices.[50] Their volume places women centre stage in order to show that whilst there were fewer women actively working in the periodical trade, they were nevertheless a substantial force in the culture of making, publishing, distributing and consuming periodicals: put simply,

[49] Ibid., pp. 60, 62, 66. For all the letters see pp. 60-81 and Appendix D. Some of the letters are undated and most without years.
[50] Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell ed. *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

they argue, ‘there is no periodical culture in the English tradition without women, full stop’.[51]

The actual level of Wells’s editorial control, discussed in depth by Knowles, is not the focus here; more salient to this study is that there was speculation about her involvement in the *World* in rival periodicals. The perception that she did wield some kind of editorial control was suspected. Just a few weeks after the *World* launched, Boyne and Walker published *Under Hoop & Bell* (26 January 1787), a graphic satire that depicts Wells wearing a hoop dress (shaped like a bell) and fashionable accoutrements such as the muff and large feathered hat. Wells both wears the dress and is the bell: with the paper’s name emblazoned on her, she both defines and is defined by the *World*.

Under her skirt Topham dangles upside down as the clapper attached through the nose by a ring and string to Wells (who holds it in her left hand). He is figured here literally led by the nose; it both challenges his masculinity and makes manifest Wells’s control over him and the *World*. He also features rather crudely as a miniature on Well’s muff and the general impression of Wells is sexualised.[52] Her sexual, rather than professional, depiction serves to undermine her activity as sexually suspect.

[51] Batchelor and Powell, ‘Introduction', p. 2.
[52] Laura Engel, 'The Muff Affair: Fashioning Celebrity in the Portraits of Late-Eighteenth-Century British Actresses', *Fashion Theory,* 13.3 (September 2009), 279-98.



Figure 1 Boyne and Walker (publishers), *Under Hoop and Bell* (BMSat 6769), 26 January 1787, hand-coloured etching on paper, 270 × 185 mm © Trustees of the British Museum.

Rival newspapers too began to satirise her involvement. The *Morning Star* (2 June 1789) published a mock correspondence between 'Topham and Becky' – a moniker taken from her role as Becky Cadwallader – in which he replies to her demanding letter with 'My dearest Becky, You know I am your slave. I have sent you ENTICK's *dictionary*; and as you are in fact EDITOR of *the paper*, write what you please. Send me *my* NEXT PUFF about yourself'. In another number (4 July 1789) a letter from 'Rebecca Wells' to 'My dere Toppey' is written in poor prose, for example 'If you [sic] don't puff me, you dog, eye wo not cawl the next child that eye am now getting, Yeurs', manifesting her onstage country simplicity as uneducated and

also speculating on her suspect sex life. Here the *Morning Star* transforms country charm into country ignorance. As well as belittling her intelligence, casting aspersions about her sex life and insinuating diva-like behaviour, the *Morning Star* also emphasises her subversive role in producing puffs about herself.

Prior to the *World*, Wells's press coverage was similar to that of many of her contemporaries; she had to pay to insert paragraphs into newspapers, was subject to the mercurial opinions of editors, receiving both positive and negative treatment. Unlike the irregular representations in other presses, the *World* offered Wells a consistently sympathetic stage. Almost daily for five years the paper was filled with panegyrics that far outstripped the level of coverage in other papers; it extensively reviewed her performances (even when she played only minor roles), comprehensively detailed her 1788 and 1789 summer journeys to provincial theatres, and generated interest in her off-stage activities, for example, by updating readers on the progress of her portraits by famous artists. In short, the *World* gave Wells a level of coverage she would not otherwise have warranted and did not seek to hide its pro-Wells bias.

Enthusiastic praise of Wells became one of the *World*'s defining features. She was not without support from other papers, notably the *Morning Chronicle*, but her career had not taken off through this means as had Siddons's or even Farren's, perhaps due to the limited language available to catapult a low comedy, secondary part player into leading lady. *The World* spoke high praise by contrast. For example, the commendation of her appearance as Julia in Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Midnight Hour* (1787) typifies the kind of superlative content: 'in every little delicate and arch requisite–in every nice and sensible discrimination–in every look and playful manner, [she] went beyond any thing we have seen from a female performer on the boards of Covent Garden this winter' (23 May 1787).

I have identified three main strands of the *World*'s coverage of Wells: first, an emphasis

on her identification with low comedy parts (an indicator that she had all but given up hopes of becoming a tragedienne); second, the creation of a space that levelled the playing field between Wells and her contemporaries; and third, attempts to police the boundaries of her 'unique theatrical commodity'.[53]

Throughout the *World*'s coverage is its emphasis on Wells's simplicity and naiveté, a small sample is indicative of the general tone; as Stella in *Robin Hood* 'to Mrs. Wells is attributable all that exquisite simplicity, and most perfect acting can add to a part, thus only raised into consequence' (7 November 1787). Her Rose in *The Recruiting Officer* 'is spoke of with as much praise as her Cowslip; and promises to be as attractive. The *arch simplicity* of it, is represented as one of the most perfect traits of Acting, that has been seen on the Stage this season' (22 February 1788). In *The Fox's Fortune* 'To the little part of *Angelina*, Mrs. Wells gave all that could be given, in innocent and playful simplicity. Her appearance was *Angelina* in reality' (26 March 1788). In Inchbald's *Animal Magnetism* she 'gave the first signs of being in Love, with great naiveté and charm of simplicity' (30 April 1788). And as Stella in *Robin Hood*, she was 'never perhaps more felicitous either in archness or simplicity' (26 January 1789). Her Letty in *Tit for Tat* 'was a fresh confirmation of her powers in archness and simplicity' (8 July 1790). And on 30 November 1791 the paper pronounced that 'Mrs. Wells still lives to preserve and convey the picture of pure simplicity. In this line she has no rival on the English Stage'.

The repeated phrases work to signify Wells's dominance in her line of business. The coupling of 'archness', which means 'cleverness, waggishness; good-humoured slyness, pleasantry, with 'simplicity', makes clear that the *World*'s meaning is not the rustic ignorance of 'simplicity', but rather presents its subject as naturally able.[54] Even the 'slyness' suggested

[53] Brooks, *Playing Women*, p. 26.
[54] 'archness, n.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/10424?redirectedFrom=archness> [accessed 4 December 2018].

by archness is presented as a kind of flirtatious quickness that sparkles with comic timing rather than suspect artifice. The *World* did not invent this characterisation, but instead drew upon an established topos to describe Wells in performance; for example, the *Public Advertiser* (17 January 1785) wrote of Wells's 'simplicity–the purest and the nearest to nature' as Becky Cadwallader, and the *Morning Herald* (18 June 1785) praised her 'archness and simplicity' in *A Beggar on Horseback*. These earlier descriptions most likely, of course, came from the hand of Wells and her allies, but in the *World* the attribution is clear.

What is surprising about this is that it is at odds with Wells's desire to move into more serious parts. Though this signals an admission that her tragic career was never to be, it also works hard to transform the impact of her low comedy roles from secondary to principal parts. Consider the *World*'s description of her 1787 benefit performance as Madge in *Love in a Village*:

> In *Madge* she has created a wonderful part out of nothing, by the mere force of accordant feeling. A look of unvarying sorrow–and strong simplicity of manner. With all former actresses it went for nothing–with *her* it is the predominating character in the piece.[55]

This review presents a world in which Wells is centre stage; it presents her transformative effect on minor parts. She has a unique ability to make a minor part of major importance and become the star. Throughout the *World* Wells does not simply act the part but *is* the part and she overshadows her rivals, both in the same kinds of roles and starring opposite her.

Closely linked to this is the second feature of the *World*'s coverage: presenting Wells as equal to her rivals. Although unsuccessful in the tragic line, Wells was presented by the *World* as gifted with an equal art, that of mimicry: 'That Mrs. Siddons can act–that Mrs. Billington can sing–and that Mrs. Wells can imitate–are the three ruling fashionable truths of

[55] *The World,* 2 May 1787.

the day'. Later, when her career was failing, it reported that she appeared in Warwick as Jane Shore and Cowslip 'on the same terms as Mrs. Jordan'.[56] For the readers of the *World* at least, Wells's value was measured against the successes of her contemporaries – allegations that she dominated an art or earned equal amounts were a 'proof' of her success. Though on occasion the *World* did mock her rivals, this was a more effective and subtle method of raising Wells's reputation.

A (hypothetical) reader only of the *World* plausibly might mistake Wells's importance within theatrical culture in the late 1780s. Within the context of the paper itself, alongside other paragraphs on notable figures, the attention paid to Wells helps to legitimise her as part of fashionable life, which created a kind of fiction of her position. Though the reality might not bear this out, within the world of the *World* Wells at least shared centre stage with her rivals. The *World* published a triptych of poems by Della Crusca addressed to Siddons, Wells and Farren: "Ode to Mrs. Siddons" (12 January 1788), "Ode to Simplicity: Addressed to Mrs. Wells" (16 April 1788), and "Ode to Miss Farren" (9 May 1788), in which, as Knowles points out, 'Della Crusca displays no interest in the "real", the off-stage, woman'.[57] Della Crusca instead draws upon the common tropes – Siddons's tragic pathos, Wells's simplicity and Farren's beauty – presented in newspapers and magazines. Though published months apart, this set of poems, by the same author, evinces the way the press could draw both implicit and explicit connections between players.

Della Crusca's play on the typical representations of these public women transforms bland poems into more sophisticated cultural commentaries. "Ode to Simplicity", described by Knowles as a 'deeply ironic puff poem', riffs off the repetition of 'simplicity' presented in the *World* and shows a playful understanding of how celebrity identities were constructed in the

[56] *The World,* 12 April 1788; *The World,* 30 July 1791.
[57] Claire Knowles, *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition, 1780-1860: The Legacy of Charlotte Smith* (Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 35.

newspapers. More important than the content of the poem is the fact that Siddons and Farren were also presented with poems, sending a clear signal of her equality with these two Queens of Drury Lane (although the one addressed to Wells is an 'Ode to Simplicity' rather than her). Wells deliberately invokes them in order to raise her own profile (something she repeats later in her *Memoirs*). Moreover, by featuring Wells in a paper purportedly about the fashionable world, *ergo* she became part of the fashionable world, even if she was in reality an otherwise marginal figure. Her involvement in the *World*, therefore, is not incidental but integral to understanding this.

The third key feature of the *World*'s coverage of Wells was to police her 'unique theatrical commodity'. By this I mean that it defended her imitations against that of imitative usurpers. On 25 January 1788 Jane Bannister staged imitations of contemporary actresses (including Siddons, Farren and Wells) for her father's benefit at the Royalty Theatre, where Wells had originally performed her imitations. The *World* was quick to play down her success. Bannister anticipated that Wells would ghost her act, so she prefaced the imitations with an address, as Wells had done, in which she declared she feared she should have 'kept *behind* the curtain':

> For late a female on these boards appear'd,
> By Fashion follow'd, and by Truth rever'd,
> Whose magic charms, and excellence display'd,
> The full extent of all our *Mimic* trade.[58]

The deference to Wells is a common strategy in which a newcomer precludes criticism against them in favour of the established player by acknowledging their rival's superiority. On stage such a speech works to get audience support, and, when published in the newspapers, it could act as more substantive defence following bad press – a kind of rebuttal to the backlash.

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[58] 'An Occasional Address delivered by Miss Bannister on her Father's Night: being her first Appearance at the Royalty, to give her Theatric Imitations', *Public Advertiser,* 31 January 1788.

Almost inevitably the *World* (22 January 1788) judged her unfavourably: 'for a young beginner, the attempt was certainly arduous. Criticism obliges us to say, that the impersonification was exact only in *Miss Farren*'. The review did acknowledge the 'poetic merit' of the address, which is unsurprising because the speech affirmed Wells's pre-eminence in imitations. The commendation of Bannister's imitation of Farren ought not to be taken at face value either; first, lists of Wells's imitations suggests that she did not attempt Farren publicly, and so Bannister did not infringe upon Wells's act, and second, given their apparent antipathy discussed by Wells in her *Memoirs*, the idea that she was easy to imitate is neither flattering to Bannister nor Farren.

The *World* drew distinctions between Bannister and Wells: 'A Lady [Wells] who in this Line never had, and never would have an equal–because her Imitations were the Result of Nature, and not of Art'. Bannister essentially infringes on Wells's act. The *World* cannot discredit her for this (imitations were a widespread entertainment), but it can emphasise her inferiority. The accusation here that Bannister is inferior because her imitations are studied rather than 'the result of nature' is part of the myth of Wells's mimicry; it makes her talent unique and untouchable, whilst also fits with her broader identification with her natural simplicity, much lauded by the *World*.

The *World*'s comments prompted a vociferous defence of Bannister in the *Morning Post* (25 January 1788); it not only claimed that 'her attempt to give Mrs. Siddons was certainly equal, if not superior to Mrs. Wells' (the jewel in Wells's imitation crown), it also attacked Topham:

> There is but one Man in the World who will take upon him to contradict the assertions here made: and he has but one agreement to offer in support of his favourite, which is, that all she says, and all she does, must be pure *nature*, the Lady being universally allowed a true *natural*.–Hence it was, that certain distinguished personages, some time since, wished to see the performances of a human being undisguised by those accomplishments which nature

> receives from art. Should the young lady ever attempt those imitations again, good judges will see and hear whether the spurious opinion of the World is to be relied on or not.

The *Morning Post* challenges Topham's bias and mocks his single defence of Wells (here 'the Lady'): her claims to a natural performance. It typically flatters the public as 'good judges' and empowers them to 'see and hear' for themselves the falsity of the *World*. The *Morning Post*'s review appears days after that of the performance and of the *World*'s comments.

Overall the distinguishing feature of Wells's coverage in *The World* is its volume, which far outstripped the coverage in other papers. Such puffery did not go unchallenged. During the summer of 1788 the *World* continually puffed Wells's journey around provincial theatres. A small sample gives a sense of the tone; she 'played…to the fullest House ever known at Cheltenham' (17 July 1788), 'had the house been three times as large, it had been taken' (21 July 1788), and 'the house was very full' (22 August 1788). Not only is the emphasis on her popularity, but it also implies that Wells is fashionable and therefore readers (who consider themselves fashionable) should like her too. Not only was this doubtful, but also reportedly counter-intuitive:

> The Cheltenham *puffers* have defeated their own purposes, and by their own means. They wanted to bring company to the place, by telling the public company that "there was no room," and the public have taken them at their word. The place is really thin, comparatively speaking; and Mrs. Wells, puffed in a manner absolutely disgusting, has played to very indifferent houses.[59]

Extant records do not enable us to verify either way, but once again, for readers far away in London the truth is less important than the representations in their daily press. Newspapers often disputed the claims made in other periodicals, but the *World* was an even greater target given Wells's involvement and denouncing the efficacy of the puffs was a further attack.

[59] *Morning Herald,* 22 July 1788.

Despite a unique position to shape her media coverage, it could still be challenged in other newspapers.

A Sea Change: Sex and Scandal in Westminster and Weymouth

A sea change occurred in 1789: both the *World* and Wells were vociferously attacked in other papers. Leading the charge was the *Morning Post*, which had been an open critic of the *World* for some time. In 1789 it referred to the *World* as the 'booby World' or 'booby print' frequently, and lost no opportunity to point out its spurious claims.[60] The paper mocked the *World's* pretentions to serious journalism on 5 August 1789 in a long section called 'Worldiana' and then again on 19 October 1789 in a section entitled '*GENERAL HINTS for the BOOBY PRINT*'. The latter is a kind of style manual that satirises various common features of the *World*. The first example insinuates that the *World* misleads readers regarding Wells's success:

> Speak of the *success* of BECKY and her *reputation* in the West, though her benefit did not draw the expenses of the house, and though the Magistrates in Exeter would probably have committed her as a vagrant, if Mrs. SIDDONS has not humanely interposed.

This comment casts doubt upon Wells's legitimacy and denounces Wells's presentation in the *World* as false. Moreover, the *Morning Post* assumes their readership was familiar with the content of the *World* in order to get the joke. Rivalries could be productive for both papers by increasing interest and thus (potentially) circulation.

John Bell's departure from the *World*, following a split with Topham, added to the paper's foes. He launched his new paper, *Oracle. Bell's New World*, on 1 June 1789, in which he set out the 'origin of the World' and his history with Topham. He complains that Topham

[60] I have found over twenty such comments in 1789.

behaved 'unhandsomely' towards him. Wells is only mentioned as Topham's 'intimate friend'. Even former supporter of Wells, William Woodfall – now editor of new paper *Diary or Woodfall's Register* – attacked the 'illiberal World': 'if the World is as successful as it pretends to be, what must be thought of the *generosity*, *affection*, and *delicacy* of its conductor, in permitting Mrs. Wells, its *idolised* Mrs. Wells, to *vagabondize* about the country, from post to pillar, for her *daily bread*'.[61] By the end of the summer all papers, including the *Morning Chronicle* and *Public Advertiser*, which were previously complimentary of Wells and were only recently sold by Woodfall, complained about the *World* and, by association, Wells too.

Rather than being viewed as the target, occasionally Wells was viewed as a casualty of the *World*. The *Morning Post* (25 May 1789), for instance, claimed it would not publish a scurrilous attack on Wells by 'W.T' because 'she is rather to be pitied in being so often the victim of such clumsy and disgusting panegyric'. Rival papers began to use her identification with simplicity and naiveté against her. The *Morning Post* snidely called her Becky, after her role as Becky Cadwallader in Samuel Foote's *The Author* (1757). Becky is stupid, petulant and lacking polite, refined town manners. Her husband, Cadwallader, describes her as 'a little foolish or so, but of a very good Family'.[62] His cruelty towards her is presented jocundly –he spends much of the play calling her 'child' and says of her, 'she's a damnd Fool, and won't know the Difference'.[63] Though they appear in a comedy, his jibes at her ignorance satirise the men that pick wives because they are from 'a good family'. By conflating Wells with the ignorant and impolite Becky, the *Morning Post* mocked her intelligence. It was also as 'Becky' that the *Morning Star* speculated on her influence at the *World*, discussed above, in which she is presented as a country bumpkin. In fact, I have only found evidence of its usage in disparaging remarks, though it has been unfortunately misinterpreted in criticism to the present

[61] *Morning Post,* 4 July 1789.
[62] Samuel Foote, *The Author* (London: T. Lowndes and W. Nicoll, [n.d]), I.1, p. 14.
[63] Ibid, p.15.

day as an affectionate, or at least neutral, moniker. Put simply, if an article referred to Wells as 'Becky' it signalled an unfavourable report.

Wells's sexual proclivities and behaviour were also suspect. On 15 April 1789 the *Morning Post* claimed: 'It is to be hoped that the insinuation of an evening paper against the conductors of the WORLD is not properly founded [...] it may tend to bring some discredit on the immaculate reputation of poor *Becky'*. This paragraph, an obvious rhetorical advice that allows them to at once deny and repeat the allegation, draws attention to Wells's suspect sexuality. This 'Becky' is not the rustic innocent; she is ill-mannered and sexually available. On 13 June 1789 the *Morning Post* drew together her imitations, her reputations and her public display at the Hastings trial:

> The last of BECKY's *imitations* was in WESTMINSTER-HALL, where she endeavoured to assume the appearance of *attention* and a *comprehension* of what was proceeding in the Court; but in spite of all her efforts, honest *nature* predominated, and [t]he ideot [sic] simper of mental vacuity continued to possess her features.

The distortion of Wells's longstanding characterisation as simple and natural evinces the instability of celebrity identity, which needs to be made and remade and can be swiftly undone.

The *Morning Post* also attacked Wells's pretensions to be equal to her contemporaries, like Siddons: 'The story about a dispute between Mrs. SIDDONS and Mrs. WELLS is, we are assured, without foundation, as Mrs. SIDDONS never went to any place where Mrs. WELLS was received, and has not exchanged one syllable with her'.[64] That Siddons, that paragon of dignity and politeness, rejected Wells was a powerful case against her; where the *World* sought to legitimise Wells as part of fashionable life, the *Morning Post* delegitimised her and presented her as beyond it. She was characterised as sexually suspect, lacking intelligence and manipulative. Another description of Wells undermined her influential role in the paper,

[64] *Morning Post,* 13 August 1789.

accusing her of using the paper to attack her rivals:

> BECKY has made such a blustering about the praise of Mrs. SIDDONS, which appeared in the *Jack-a-dandy* print, that the reverend Conductor must notice Mrs. SIDDONS no more, or convert his panegyric into abuse, or dismission will follow. So says the amiable and resolute *Becky.*[65]

The *Morning Post* transforms Wells into a termagant who demands that Este must cease praise of Siddons or at least 'abuse' her instead – or risk his post at the '*Jack-a-dandy* print*'*, the *World*. Whether Wells ever held such power is not known, but the paper successfully drew upon fears about women's authority.

Though the *Morning Post* had been a critic of Wells for a lengthy period, in 1789, numerous tales of Wells's erratic and suspect behaviour began to circulate. The newspapers began to speculate upon Wells's sex life, with several allusions to her relationship with Frederick Reynolds, the author of *The Dramatist* (1789), which had premiered for her Covent Garden benefit on 15 May 1789. Wells starred as Marianne, who falls in love with Vapid, the titular dramatist. A snub against Topham can be seen here: Vapid spends much of the play obsessed with writing an epilogue.[66] Allusions to Wells and Reynolds's intimacy appeared on several occasions; the *Morning Star* (1 May 1789) made a crude joke about Reynolds's 'piece' being given to Wells for 'one night' – strictly speaking meaning of course the new play for her benefit – that they 'hope' she will 'act with similar affability by presenting hers for another. This would be *Tit for Tat*, or *Love for Love*'. The *Morning Post* (9 June 1789) played its usual trick of denouncing something it wanted to circulate: 'To prevent the Public from crediting the *intimacy* between Becky Wells and Reynolds, we must pretend to ridicule it *ourselves*'. This kind of speculation, which at once makes and disavows a rumour, is a familiar technique used

[65] *Morning Post,* 3 October 1789.
[66] Reynolds, *The Dramatist*.

to avoid libel; here the line turns on the duality of 'pretend', which means both 'to imagine' or 'to feign', and also 'put forward an assertion'.[67]

There were plenty of implicit and explicit references to Wells and Reynolds's affair throughout the summer. The *Morning Star* (1 May 1789) crudely wrote that they 'hope' that as Reynolds 'gives the lady his *piece* for one night': it would not have gone unnoticed that elsewhere in that same paper a letter from 'Parson *ESTE* to *NED TOPHAM*' included the line 'Becky denies–still denies the child'.[68] These rumours reached their apex in the *Morning Post* on 19 September 1789: 'There is said to be a prodigious resemblance between *Becky*'s last child and young Reynolds. The world, however, should not be censorious, for such likenesses are often wholly accidental'. Helen Brooks points out that attention to actresses' sex lives in eighteenth-century scholarship unproductively limits new avenues of research.[69] However, in considering the contribution of the press to the making of actresses' celebrity it is necessary to acknowledge the importance to the media of speculation on the sex lives of famous people. The personal cannot ever be said to be 'private'; the sex lives of royals and nobles was very much a public affair and, on a less exalted scale, the sex lives of members of small communities was local gossip. Nevertheless, the newspapers circulated tales and invited public debate (particularly about women) on persons not linked to matters of state or to the local community.

Though sexual scandal was not an uncommon story, other strange stories about Wells emerged that were at once humorous and suspect. The first was her attendance at the Hastings Trial in Westminster-Hall, in which she apparently got out her knitting.[70] The second major story was her apparently stalker-like behaviour in Weymouth, following the royal party on a

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[67] 'pretend, v.', in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/150938> [accessed 4 December 2018].
[68] For further allusions to the Reynolds-Wells affair see *Star,* 25 May 1789; *Morning Post,* 26 May 1789; *Morning Star,* 4 June 1789; *Morning Post,* 9 June 1789; *Morning Post*, 13 June 1789; *Morning Star,* 23 June 1789.
[69] Brooks, *Playing Women*, pp. 4-5.
[70] *The World,* 22 May 1789; *Morning Star,* 25 May 1789; *Morning Post,* 25 May 1789; *Morning Post*, 26 May 1789; *Morning Star,* 26 May 1789; *Morning Post,* 11 June 1789; *Morning Star*, 23 June 1789.

yacht.[71] Though presented increasingly as a ridiculous figure, she was also an underlying threat to public order. Whilst such stories circulated, Wells remained newsworthy – but they also posed a threat to her reputation.

Veracity has little to do with the content of either puffs or censures; instead they were a kind of print entertainment. Topham and Wells became quasi-fictional characters. I suggested earlier that Siddons was fictionalised in the newspapers and later novelised in prose fiction, but the 'characters' of Topham and Wells served a different purpose: to perpetuate gossip. One popular form was fake correspondence: the *Morning Star* (1 May 1789) printed 'letters' between 'Ned Topham' and 'Parson Este' and the *Morning Post* (1 September 1789) published a letter, in rhyme, from Topham to Este in which he claims 'the disgrace of *our* annals, some beings there are, / who assert that all manner of falsehoods appear' and proceeds to supply some 'authentic and true' news about his dog, Towzer. It lists the various kinds of mendacious content and turns Topham into a ridiculous figure. On 21 August 1789 the *Morning Post* published a whimsical rhyming letter 'From David Simple in Town, to his dear Sister Becky, at Weymouth' in which Simple tells Becky of her town reputation, 'your fame is so torn'. The violent sexual image evinces the centrality of female sexuality and the body of an actress to celebrity.

The *Morning Star* (26 May 1789) also satirised the *World*'s most famous literary feature, though by now ended, by publishing a faux poetic exchange between 'Della Crusca' and 'Anna Matilda', on Wells at Westminster Hall. A stranger 'fiction' appeared in that same paper the following month: a 'Translation of an authentic Chapter of Rabelais, omitted in all the editions of his works, but lately discovered, in digging up a ruin at *Dijon*, his native village'.[72] In 'Chap. XCIX' we see Rabelais's (d.1553) Pantagruel, walking with his friends,

[71] *Morning Star,* 3 August 1789; *Public Advertiser,* 25 August 1789*; The World,* 29 August 1789; *Oracle. Bell's New World*, 11 September 1789.

[72] The parts concerning Wells appeared in the *Morning Star* on 7, 9 and 15 July 1789.

encounter ‘a man in the habit of a clerk, with a bundle of papers on his back, travelling towards the *East*’ who tells him he is off to Cheltenham to see Wells. The man speaks in ‘jargon’ that reflects the superlative encomiums found in the *World* and proceeds to tell Pantagruel and his friends about Wells and Topham. They take him hostage in order to interrogate him the next day. Pantagruel tells the Clerk that ‘your appearance is very suspicious. My interpreter and decipherer, who understand all languages living and dead, and all characters used to represent them, having been poring over your *Papers* all night, without being able to make *sense* of a single sentence’. The clerk is thrilled; he claims that the ‘invincible Capt. Topham, and the super-angelic Mrs. Wells’ will be pleased because they ‘shun’ sense.

This satire on Wells, Topham and the *World* co-opts Rabelais’ satire *Pantagruel* as a way of playing with stories about public individuals. To point out that these inauthentic letters, poems and prose stories are all ‘fakes’ perhaps misses the point; these were not intended to be mistaken for a ‘real’ Della Cruscan poem or an authentic fragment of Rabelais. Instead, it was entertainment-value, rather than veracity that was important. Like the appropriation of fictional characters discussed earlier, the ‘characters’ of notable public figures were open to use and abuse, and using established literary forms was one way of doing this. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering David Francis Taylor’s comment about graphic satire: that its literariness automatically excludes some readers from the full joke.[73]

Throughout, the *World* maintained its steadfast promotion of Wells. Claire Knowles argues that Wells used the paper ‘to provide counter-narrative to the commonly told accounts of her madness and instability’.[74] Yet her links to the *World* in the first place contributed to her vilification in other presses. For the most part the *World* attempted to maintain its usual accounts of Wells, but on other occasions it responded to scurrilous rumours directly; for

[73] Taylor, *Politics of Parody*, pp. 24-39.
[74] Knowles, ‘Women Behind the Man', p. 397.

example, it wryly reported her attendance at the forty-sixth day of the Hastings Trial as 'fine amusement for the *vulgar Prints*'.[75] Laughter, discussion and taking the moral high ground against other papers, with almost amused and aloof tone, worked to compromise the propriety of other papers. Indeed, vociferous responses might well have been counter-productive, contributing to rather than undermining the claim that Wells was turbulent. Dismissing other papers as simply '*vulgar Prints*' did not dispel the rumour, however, and Wells's career never fully recovered.

Laura Engel discusses an 'alarming' encounter between Frances Burney and Wells at the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery in 1792.[76] Engel investigates this anecdote in terms of Burney's vexed encounters and negotiations of public space with actresses, and uses this incident in particular as 'evidence of Wells's presence and impact offstage'.[77] My interest here lies in a brief moment in which Burney resists her companion Francis Crewe's call to fetch John Boydell to complain: 'o no! cried I, in a horrid fright, I beseech I may not be named!—And indeed, Ma'am, it be better to let it all alone. It will do no good: & it may get into the News-papers' and then 'I must always fear being brought into any News-paper cabals. Let the fact be ever so much against her, she will think the circumstances all to her honour, if a paragraph [sic] comes out beginning *Mrs. Crewe & Mrs. Wells.–*'.[78] Burney's fear of public exposure has been well documented by Engel and others, but the particular fear about the newspapers here is telling both about the content of the newspapers and the kinds of notice that this encounter might receive. Burney's fears were not unfounded; from 1789 Wells's behaviour was under much public scrutiny.

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[75] *The World,* 29 May 1789.
[76] Laura Engel, 'Close Encounters: Frances Burney, Actresses, and Models for Female Celebrity', *The Burney Journal,* 12 (2012), 7-27 (pp. 7; 14-21).
[77] Ibid., p. 22.
[78] Frances Burney, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madam D'arblay), Vol.1: 1791-1792*, ed. by Joyce Hemlow, 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online* <https:dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198114987.book.1>, pp. 210-11.
Also qtd. in Engel, 'Close Encounters', pp. 17, 20.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS BAD PRESS?

> How to make an equal, and then, a paramount impression? Only, by obtaining celebrity, or notoriety; at that time, as now, nearly synonymous terms[79]

For Wells certainly, as Engel suggests, celebrity and notoriety are entwined. This quotation (unrelated to Wells), taken from Reynolds's *Memoirs*, is a useful place to think about the effect of the overlap between puffs and censure of Wells. In 1791, Reynolds wrote another vehicle for Wells, *Notoriety*, in which she appeared as Sophia Strangeways. Both the play's title and character's name nod to Wells's reputation for infamous behaviour – and suggests that she was playfully aware it. Whether Wells was suffering from some mental disorder or she staged her 'madness' in order to attract notice, it was documented in the newspapers. But what was the effect? In the short-term, Wells was a successful 'celebrity', frequently read about in the daily news, but in the long-term, her career struggled before more-or-less grinding to a halt.

There appears to be little benefit to her outrageous behaviour. If it was a strategy, it was a risky strategy: it had given her a temporary press boost but no long-term success. Though the *World* continued (albeit less frequently) to laud Wells's simplicity and naiveté, others were no longer impressed. On 4 February 1791 the *Gazetteer* 'recommended to Mrs. Wells to remember, in her next performance of Madge, that she is to personify the *simplicity* of a country girl, not the *knowing* manners of a town *virago*'. The truism that there is no such thing as bad press is not therefore quite borne out given that her career never really recovered, her suspect behaviour saw her shunned from polite circles and even her old successes – like Madge – were now seen through a new, tainted lens.

The history of Wells's interaction with the press, particularly the open secret of her

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[79] Frederick Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), II, p. 285.

involvement in *World* also raises questions about the efficacy and purpose of puffing: what was the effect of puffs that were so clearly authored by Wells or someone close to her? Did her 'counter-narrative' have any effect at all? Yes, through her participation in the *World*, Wells was able to shape one version of her public self. However, whilst her unusual status as quasi editor gave her unprecedented scope for dictating the content of a daily newspaper, it had ultimately little effect in increasing her popularity or securing her parts. In fact, her direct involvement in the running of a paper appears to have created some of the backlash.

If puffs were a form of entertainment, the license to parody and satirise public figures was granted so long as it was entertaining to the public. Wells's entertainment-value diminished and so did her career. By 1793, Wells was no longer regularly engaged at any theatre; she had split definitively with Topham and stopped working for the *World*. It is tempting to view the fact that the curtain fell on her career following her departure from the *World* as evidence that it had been effective in bolstering her career, perhaps long after she had ceased to be popular. But the *World* also contributed to her downfall: the public (and other papers) eventually tired of the constant outrageous puffs. There is no decisive answer to why Wells's career failed; her unpredictable behaviour became a liability rather than a selling point, the death of Edwin in 1790 too marked the end of the successful 'Lingo and Cowslip' partnership, and her line of business in low comedy rustic parts simply did not give the newspapers the scope to describe her in the same terms used with leading ladies such as Siddons or Farren. What has been shown is that the newspapers could play a part in both the making and unmaking of celebrity.

Perhaps the respective success of Wells and the *World* was mutually contingent: *The World* too soon folded, its rival the *Oracle* not only attracting readers but also several contributors.[80] For several years the *World* helped to mediate Wells's life to the newspaper-reading public, then suddenly her career was all but over. From then on, she only attracted

[80] Knowles, 'Women Behind the Man', p. 404.

occasional notice in the press; for example, *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (11 November 1798) reported how far she had fallen: **'**her [Wells] imitations were given in a Country Barn, at Malton, for the benefit of some miserable Strolling Players, which produced fifteen pounds'. Though no longer either a producer of a paper nor often the subject, Wells would turn to the newspapers again in the construction of her *Memoirs*.

FAKE NEWS? NEWS EXTRACTS IN MEMOIRS

> The *letter* remains when the *spirit* is no more, and Mrs. Inchbald will be read when Mrs. Wells is forgotten.[81]

Aware perhaps that her career was fading fast and, as the *Public Advertiser* predicted, memory of Wells's ephemeral art would vanish, she turned her thoughts to a memoir. The *Gazetteer* (21 August 1792) reported that Wells 'circulated proposals for a history of her own life, to be written by herself' as early as 1792, but it did not appear until 1811. It was titled *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sumbel, late Wells, of the Theatres Royal Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and Haymarket, written by herself*. Unlike the newspapers, in which reputations are made, unmade and remade from issue to issue, a memoir offers a retrospective account that often reconciles inconsistencies and produces a kind of definitive public version. Not so with Wells; her narrative is unwieldy, non-linear and seems to revel in her reputation as mad, rather than try to dispel it. Though Engel and Savage discuss Wells's *Memoirs*, criticism has paid little attention to her extensive appropriation from the newspaper coverage of her acting career.

What follows investigates her use of newspapers in her *Memoir*, which was designed to lay down her reputation for posterity compared to the newspapers' ordinary more ephemeral effect. Earlier in this thesis I have observed that the newspaper offers a different kind of

[81] *Public Advertiser,* 13 July 1786.

celebrity making than theatrical biographies, which have received more critical attention. The memoir, constructed with the benefit of hindsight, is necessarily revisionist, whereas celebrity news in the periodicals is contingent, often (though not always) inconsistent, unpredictable, and inaccurate. Of course, theatrical biographies are not straightforward and can be – as Wells's often is – inconsistent, unpredictable and inaccurate too. But whilst newspaper fragments are diffuse, the theatrical biography is likely to aim for integration. On a practical level, this explains one reason that critics have tackled theatrical biographies more consistently than the newspaper 'lives'. Wells blends these two forms together; her memoir is steeped in the only decades-old tradition of the theatrical biography, but it also repeatedly draws on the newspaper – fragments not intended to survive – indeed perhaps contradicted in another paragraph on another day.

Wells's choice to co-opt newspaper extracts to tell parts of her life has been overlooked. Though Engel reminds us that memoirs are 'not transparent documents of theater history', neither she nor Savage in their discussions of the *Memoirs* scrutinise Wells's use of newspaper material, which frequently punctuate her narrative.[82] Savage even claims that the newspapers were 'overwhelmingly positive in their reviews of Wells's acting' without reflecting on the fact that Wells selected which extracts to use.[83] The tendency not to interrogate Wells's newspaper choices means that the sense that she has curated media coverage of herself has been lost in studies of her memoir. We should not read these extracts as incidental, additional or neutral, but as active as the rest of the narrative in presenting a particular image of Wells to readers. Her use of the newspaper extracts is a timely intervention into the memoir genre, borne of being a player on the stage at the start of a new media world, but it also reflects Wells's particularly close connection with newspapers and recognition of their role in presenting

[82] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p. 105.
[83] Savage, p. 76.

players to the public.

Wells's use of extracts from newspapers in her *Memoirs* is not straightforward: I have identified inconsistencies, misattribution, and distorted timelines. Whilst this is not dissimilar to the rest of the narrative, as pointed out by Engel, it calls into question the validity, purpose and effect of using the press. Periodicals confer authority and appear to support the legitimacy of Wells's claims, but they are also, crucially, difficult to verify. The newspaper is integral to the structure of the *Memoirs*, with Wells reliant upon extracts that appear to support her claims, perhaps because they lend credence to her narrative. The extracts are undated, and even the detail provided I have found to be suspect. Some errors might plausibly be accidental, but the number suggests Wells's manipulation of the facts, knowing, crucially, that readers would have difficulty in checking – but the appearance of authority from the press remains. Of course, her selections warrant scrutiny in themselves; she does not use negative coverage for example, but beyond omissions there are other, more troubling, usages. I turn now to assess the various ways Wells curated herself through the news.

Given that Wells lived and worked through a period of theatrical history that was intimately linked with the periodical press it is not a surprise that newspapers feature heavily in her construction of the *Memoirs*. To a certain extent we should expect self-promotion in her account of her career. For example, when describing her 'first essay' on the stage in Birmingham as the Duke of York in *Richard III*, she claims that 'the public and the papers of the day were pleased to express their approbation of my first juvenile attempt'.[84] Her memoir is typically self-aggrandising, and is tricky to verify, but this does not necessarily make it a false claim – there were active local presses that reported on provincial theatre after all.

Wells goes on to detail her first appearance in London, under Mr. Colman, in *Love in a Village* to which she attaches a footnote apparently from the *Public Advertiser* (undated), which

[84] Wells, p. 19.

she implies is a review of that performance:

> Mrs. Wells appeared for the first time in Madge at this theatre. This lady has established her fame as an actress in characters of this nature; and her last performance of Margery confirms the final decision stands good. In the dance she moved the first character in rusticity, which the audience provided by almost continual plaudits.[85]

Yet the substance of the review is incongruent with the sense that this is Wells's debut because it suggests she has already 'established her fame' in this kind of part, and that this performance of Madge affirms the praise already given. This review actually appears in the *Public Advertiser* on 8 December 1786, following Wells's first performance of the part at Covent Garden, over five years after she began playing the part at the Haymarket.

Later she presents a review of her playing Macheath in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which declares that whilst she 'excelled undoubtedly' the writer was unimpressed with the whole – particular the cross-gender casting. Wells presents this review as from the *Morning Chronicle* and it features during a discussion about her first appearance of Macheath which occurred on 14 September 1781: it is neither. The review can be found in the *Public Advertiser* (28 August 1784). Whilst misattribution of paper and date is not particularly egregious, it is evidence of her disordered narrative (she repeatedly confuses years). It can also alter readers' understanding of Wells's reception at different points in her career: Laura Engel quotes this review in her account of Wells's celebrity, attributing it to the start of Wells's London career, without cross-checking it with the actual paper, despite otherwise recognising that the memoir is a highly-constructed text.[86]

In a discussion of her performance as Isabella at Covent Garden in her *Memoirs*, Wells includes a review that was published in the *Morning Chronicle* on 'the day following' her

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[85] Ibid., p. 39.
[86] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p. 106 and 64n28. Both Engel and Elizabeth Savage do this on several occasions.

appearance:

> On Thursday night Mrs. Wells made her appearance in Isabella; and, although the audience went with such strong prejudices in favour of the fashionable Melpomene, yet never did Mrs. Siddons draw more genuine tears from an audience. It is impossible to conceive what a high-finished picture this lady gave of Isabella's woes, and how nearly she arrived to nature in almost every scene. There were no studied pauses, to purchase, by vacancy of time, the approving hands of the audience, and yet the house echoes with repeated marks of approbation. Her shriek at the discovery of Biron had a good effect, but was rather that of terror without amazement, than of terror and amazement mixed. When the public consider that this Mrs. Wells is that Mrs. Wells who performed Cowslip, they will scarcely credit the assertion, that in some parts she was equal, in some superior, and not in many inferior, to Mrs. Siddons. She has a beautiful face, with most expressive features, which no doubt are much in her favour; but that in which she excels, is her following nature, and concealing all the study of art in representing the character.[87]

This extract presents Wells favourably by both explicit and implicit comparisons to Siddons throughout. The reviewer hints, however, that the memory of Wells as Cowslip will prejudice her reception; now that Wells has performed the part well; the onus is on the public to accept her. Wells's triumph is 'her following nature, and concealing all the study of art' – high praise indeed. I have not been able, however, to trace this account in the *Morning Chronicle*, nor in any other daily newspapers, following either her sole appearance as Isabella at Covent Garden on 2 January 1786 or her two other attempts at Drury Lane on 30 April 1784 and at the Haymarket on 5 August 1784.

In fact, the actual account in the *Morning Chronicle* (3 January 1786) is far less generous. It claims that 'Mrs. Wells has much to combat, before she can expect to be generally allowed to hold rank as a tragedian'. The reviewer admits that owing to her comic skills there is 'a prejudice that operates against her very forcibly, whenever she attempts tragedy', though

[87] Wells, pp. 25-26.

unfortunately on this occasion 'this prejudice is rather heightened than diminished at present, by her not being as yet able to divest herself entirely of a comic carriage and demeanour, while she wears the buskin'. So, whilst the review suggests that 'Time however and perseverance may get the better of all this', she is hardly presented here as a serious rival to Siddons. And it is certainly not the review indicated by Wells.

The review presented by Wells tells us that her appearance took place on a Thursday night, which only her Haymarket Isabella did. Again, however, the *Morning Chronicle* is misrepresented; nothing like the review Wells claims appears following that performance, nor the one at Drury Lane. Methodological challenges – such as missing issues, hard to read print, the possibility that material may linger in obscure newspapers not available in library catalogues – prevent conclusive evidence that this review did not exist in some form. But it did not appear in the paper Wells claims it was in. At the very least this suggests the need for close inspection of her use of newspapers.

Over two pages are dedicated to another *Morning Chronicle* review – this time of her first appearance as Imogen in *Cymbeline* in November 1784 at Drury Lane.[88] The review praises her 'face and figure' and claims that 'in passages, her tones and feelings were most impressive', yet nevertheless complains that 'she was not so uniformly well as with her talents she might be', before concluding that she will improve 'when she is no longer subject to the squint-eyed criticism of those who come to wonder at the tragedy of Cowslip'.[89] But this review did not appear in the *Morning Chronicle*, it actually appeared in the *Gazetteer*.[90] Once again, her misattribution might simply be a mistake, but she does specify that it was '*From the Chronicle edited by Mr. Woodfall*'.[91] Perhaps she simply felt that Woodfall's name would lend authority to the extract, especially given his reputation for balanced theatrical criticism. The

[88] Ibid., pp. 54-56.
[89] Ibid.
[90] *Gazetteer*, 20 November 1784.
[91] Wells, p. 56.

actual review that appeared in his paper lambasts her performance, concluding that she 'was so feeble and pointless in her manner, and so ridiculously wretched [...] she almost sunk beneath our pity'.[92] Again, it is not a major error, but it does remind us not to take Wells's extracts at face value.

Wells's choice to co-opt newspapers to tell parts of her story is worthy of investigation in itself. Though much of the *Memoirs* emulates or satirises earlier conventions in theatrical biographies the integral role played by the press in her story is more unusual. She appears to recognise that her deployment of reviews (often boastful) might be received poorly, so she begs her readers' pardon: for example, when discussing her appearance as Macheath she writes 'I shall take the liberty of inserting the critique which appeared in the Morning Chronicle (then the property of Mr. Woodfall) the day following my performance'.[93] This 'liberty' ostensibly adds more credibility; as this thesis has shown, however, bias and self-promotion played a big part in eighteenth-century news culture. We cannot discount the idea that Wells (or someone on her behalf) inserted these reviews into the newspapers in the first place (and that is why she still had them). So, whilst Wells did not 'fake' press accounts in her memoir, she did use the press in sometimes misleading ways.

Wells's *Memoirs* had little effect; she died in obscurity in 1829. Three years earlier, in 1826, John O'Keeffe, who had written the part of Cowslip at the start of her career, published his *Recollections of the Life of John O'Keeffe, written by himself*, which included *Poetical sketches of the well-known dramatic-performers of the old school, and other individuals connected with the drama*. Though many of her contemporaries afford lengthy encomiums, referring to numerous key parts they had played, Wells received just four lines:

> The violet withers, and the snow-drop sinks,
> Carnations droop, and fragrant stocks and pinks:

[92] *Morning Chronicle*, 20 November 1784.
[93] Wells, pp. 41-2.

> The beauteous tulip too must droop its head,
> The rose it fades for, ah! my Cowslip's dead.[94]

Despite the slightly inconvenient truth that Wells had not yet actually died, this short poem encapsulates much about Wells. The simple structure and floral theme reflect two motifs that recur in many descriptions of Wells: pastoral simplicity. It signals the longstanding association between her and a particular part; whether O'Keeffe knew she was alive or not, the finality phrase 'my Cowslip's dead' reflects her gradual fading from public view: a kind of death for a player.

For all the intense media interest, including daily speculation about her life and career, Wells was forgotten. I opened this chapter opining that Wells is a useful case study because she was a failed celebrity; her star (as she well knew) did not shine like Siddons or Farren. But whilst she failed to transfer her fame to posterity, she is perhaps the best example of an early 'media celebrity' precisely because her fame was ephemeral: she was, for a short time, in the daily news and then, she was not. Unlike Siddons and Farren perhaps she exposed too much: in her imitations she had highlighted the ease in which another's acting could be reconstructed, thereby drawing attention to the artifice of its creation in the first place. Yet in her media manoeuvres Wells laid bare the media underpinning her celebrity, she showed the construction too plainly, to borrow a gaming metaphor, she showed her hand and she could not hide it again.

Put simply, Wells's celebrity was contingent on media coverage. When the media lost interest, she faded from public view – despite attempts to remain in the public eye. O'Keeffe's depiction of her as a flower (and not a weed as she had spoken years before), though clearly drawn to recall Cowslip, does map Wells's fleeting fame. Although the 'celebrity' has become a fixture in culture from the eighteenth century to present, the individual who fulfils the role is

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[94] John O'Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O'Keeffe, Written by Himself*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), II, p. 416.

mutable, merely a host. Moreover, whilst Siddons ghosted the rest of the nineteenth-century, Wells was merely replaced by others who rose and fell as celebrities.

It is hard to capture celebrity retrospectively – difficult to represent the immersive experience that is a celebrity's brief moment in the public eye. Those mythologized into posterity become somewhat untouchable, with no sense that they were never, to borrow Roach's term, 'It'. For those, like Wells who dwindled into obscurity, it is a hard task to recreate the 'hype' about their fame at all – how can someone so famous be so forgotten? Theatrical celebrity is a 'house of cards'; the lack of a lasting body of work renders theatrical celebrity distinct from other kinds of celebrity (literary, artistic – even sporting, where a record might continue to stand), because there is no lasting and material substance that survives. I have spent some time in this chapter pointing out that the *World* fabricated Wells's popularity and presented a version of the world in which she was the talk of the town that might not have reflected the reality, which propped up her fame. And yet, the paradox of celebrity culture is that in so doing, it became so: for a short period, Wells was everywhere in the news. So, whilst the *World* did distort the realities of Wells's fame, that is *celebrity*. Wells was made in the media – and unmade by it too.

Epilogue: All About Actresses?

> No individual, to the best of my pretty extensive knowledge, ever made a star. That is a power and privilege restricted only to the unfathomable, improbable, and altogether unworthy authority known as the Mass Audience".[1]

These words, by Hollywood writer and director Joseph Mankiewicz, articulate a central idea underpinning this thesis. Celebrity is a collaborative not individual pursuit and its heart is the public who bestow certain individuals with contemporary success. To be a celebrity, however, does not mean you will achieve posthumous fame, nor does posthumous fame tell us that you were once a celebrity. Celebrity is therefore a cultural phenomenon that can tell us much about particular people invested in a particular culture at a particular moment in time. Mankiewicz's words are given in an article about his 1950 film *All About Eve*, reminding us that between the 'star' and the 'Mass Audience' is the mediating force of the periodical press.[2]

Mankiewicz is particularly important to this thesis, though perhaps unexpectedly so, because *All About Eve* is notable for the brief appearances of Sarah Siddons. Her image graces the screen as both a statuette and a reproduction print – both taken from Joshua Reynolds's *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784). The film, a satiric commentary on the Hollywood star system, tells the story of aging actress Margo Channing usurped by the youthful – and sharp-elbowed – Eve Harrington. It opens at an awards ceremony in which Eve wins the coveted Sarah Siddons Award; then, it proceeds through flashback to reveal how only one year before Eve had been a nobody hanging around at stage door, desperate to meet her idol Margo. Once introduced, Eve becomes indispensable to the actress and her circle before getting her stage break and finally overtaking Margo.

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[1] Joseph Mankiewicz, 'All About the Women in "All About Eve"', *New York*, 16 October 1972, pp. 37-42 (pp. 40-41).
[2] *All About Eve*, dir. by Joseph Mankiewicz (20th Century Fox, 1950) [on DVD].

The usurpation plot unwittingly reflects the curious ways that Mary Wells sought to mimic the off-stage strategies for image-making of both Siddons and Farren. Unlike Wells, however, Eve appears to achieve her goal. The film's close, however, resists the idea of a 'winner'. Instead the final scene sees Phoebe, a girl who Eve finds in her apartment, holding the award and looking into 'three mirrored cheval', seeing herself reflected back and forth: the cycle of nobody-stardom-nobody, on which theatrical performance thrives, will continue.

For David Román, Siddons's presence in the film 'is meant to signify not simply artistic excellence but the very best of what theatre represents to the larger culture'.[3] So too, Laura Engel proposes, that featuring Siddons is 'a testament to the lasting quality of a category of identity that Siddons invented: the modern female superstar'.[4] By casting Siddons (albeit only as a still image), Mankiewicz anchors the history of actresses' fame back to the eighteenth-century. Though the message of the film is one of repetitive substitution, some actresses, like Siddons, secure a future as a legendary figure, divorced from their actual personality to become a kind of symbol of 'the actress' through time. Laura Engel, David Román and Lisa Crafton Plummer each demonstrate that the film raises questions about the importance of Siddons to actresses' history, the transmission of performance practices through time and the idea of theatrical afterlives.[5] The film also points out the inextricability of the press to the story of actresses' celebrity.

One character in the film receives little attention in these analyses: critic Addison DeWitt. No doubt named for eighteenth-century periodical author Joseph Addison, his presence underlies the importance of the press to the theatre.[6] Addison self-proclaims

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[3] David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 155.
[4] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, pp. 26-27.
[5] Román, pp. 138-57; Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, pp. 26-28; Crafton, pp. 1 and 109-10.
[6] In interview with Gary Carey, Mankiewicz claims that parts of Addison were based on himself. Carey also notes that 'It has generally been assumed that Addison was based on George Jean Nathan, the acidulous theatre critic whose reviews between 1920 and 1950 were considered by many to have been more outrageous than accurate' in *More About All About Eve / a Colloquy by Gary Carey with Joseph L. Mankiewicz Together with His Screenplay All About Eve* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 44-45.

his (subversive) importance: '*I am essential to the Theatre – as ants to a picnic, as the boll weevil to a cotton field*'.[7] From the outset DeWitt signals to the audience his capacity to destroy. Though Román admits that DeWitt is 'the powerful theatre critic who serves as the film's main narrator', he does not credit the extent to which Addison drives the film.[8] This is clear in the film, but made more explicit in the screenplay, which provides us with Mankiewicz's stage directions.

Addison introduces the story and guides the audience's interpretation of events. He at once presents himself as somehow beyond the main plot and demands to be centre-stage. In his opening voiceover, for instance, he briefly directs attention towards the awards ceremony host, but then instantly demands our attention back on him: '*The distinguished-looking gentleman is an extremely old actor. Being an actor, he will go on speaking for some time. It is not important that you hear what he says*' (p. 116). The shot then cuts straight back to Addison.

Addison plays a mediating role for the viewer; when Margo and her lover Bill argue and go out of shot, the stage directions specify that 'Addison uses his cane to swing the door open further, so that both he and we can see as well as hear' (p. 271). In fact, Addison actively shapes the plot as well as audience reception throughout. As in some of the eighteenth-century comedies we encountered in Chapter 1, the press drives the plot in both implicit and explicit ways: Eve calls the press to attend her understudy performance, Addison interviews her afterwards, and the resulting column causes Margo much distress. Whilst this does show Eve actively engaging with the press, and she clearly believes she is manipulating it to her advantage, she is not quite in control; when she and Addison argue he reveals his hand: he knows that her real name is Gertrude Slescynski and her backstory is all lies (pp. 335-40).

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[7] Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *All About Eve Screenplay,* in *More About All About Eve / a Colloquy by Gary Carey with Joseph L. Mankiewicz Together with His Screenplay All About Eve*, ed. by Gary Carey (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 118. Italics used in screenplay to indicate voiceover. Further references will be made in text.
[8] Román, p. 156.

On a couple of occasions, other characters point out that Addison's speech is merely rehearsing his next column; the language of press reviews is at once specific (that is, easily recognised as a particular verbal form) and commonplace (the expressions are a familiar means to interpret what is happening). Addison does not need unique characterisation because he stands for the wider structure within which individual actresses (both on and off-stage) must operate. Because he is not a fully-fledged character, we cannot really know *him*, but at the same time we do know him.

On first viewing *All About Eve* Margo and Eve's rivalry seems to be the central dynamic, but revisiting the film in the light of my argument here, we should see new resonance and significance in the role of Addison. If Laura Engel is correct when she says that Siddons's presence in *All About Eve* signals her as 'a kind of originary, or starting place' for thinking about actresses' celebrity, then Addison reminds us that co-extensive with that is the periodical press.[9] The ways in which Addison remains invisible to us while in plain sight (in fact a continuing presence as voice-over) parallels the lack of notice to the role of the periodical press in the study of eighteenth-century celebrity; there has been tacit recognition that it is central, but little work interrogating its specifics. Rather, our attention is repeatedly called to the actresses and their actions which appear to drive the plot; we do not credit Addison because he appears to be – at least at the beginning of the film – a neutral bystander merely reporting: we come to learn, this is not the case.

My research elaborates what has previously only been gestured towards in eighteenth-century scholarship: that the press played a vital role in the creation of celebrity. The literature on eighteenth-century actresses' celebrity frequently showcases the ways in which actresses contributed to their own celebrity through their use of the repertoire, as well as material and visual culture. In this thesis I have added to these foundational studies by re-orienting attention

[9] Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, p. 27.

towards the media system in which they were working. Attention to the press does not belie the role actresses played in the making of celebrity, but it does complicate it; playing with gender, playing with parts, and playing with their image must be understood in terms of the mediascape that present and mediate these ideas.

My research supports the preliminary investigations into eighteenth-century press, celebrity and theatre. In Part I, I drew attention to the increasing interactivity between the press and the playhouse throughout the period, with both mediums policing the other yet inextricably linked. As well as their reciprocity, both staged 'personalities' which created the publicity conditions for celebrity to thrive.

In Part II, I explored the particular presentation of actresses through individual case studies. In each case study I have shown how particular motifs (itinerancy and tragedy, cupidity and fashion, as well as simplicity and mimicry) were central to their press coverage, resurfacing again and again, whether or not they planned for it to be so. Each case study draws attention to both the shared rhetorical strategies used by the press to discuss actresses, and the unique ways in which individual actresses were represented. For each actress I have shown that particular verbal images recur in their press coverage and that their celebrity was made just as much in the media as by their own actions.

My findings complicate the idea of individual agency by demonstrating the ways in which the press interacted with actresses' public images. Each case study sheds light not only on the verbal depictions of each actress in the press, but also on its dialogue with other mediums. The spread of language into novels, for example, suggests that the rhetoric strategies used by the press became a shared language for representing and understanding both plays and players. So too, its language was co-opted into memoirs and in dialogue with rival media such as graphic satire.

Writing about actresses in the newspapers, as I have suggested, made them into kinds

of fictional characters; Siddons in particular has continued to appear as a character in novels, including a children's book about a strolling actress, and is the subject of a radio drama, though Farren's life too has recently been fictionalised in Emma Donoghue's *Life Mask* (2004).[10] These afterlives are not signs of celebrity, but rather they are evidence of their enduring appeal, sometimes drawn from images of actresses that first gained currency in the press.

Analysis of press coverage also complicates ideas about the relationship between celebrity and posthumous reputation. The identification with Siddons and her strolling past, so prevalent in contemporary reviews, is largely absent from her posthumous image, secured both by Reynolds's defining image – and Hazlitt's final words on her. The longevity of Hazlitt's periodical writing resists the simple understanding of the press as ephemeral, but for the most part the content of much newspaper coverage has not had as long lifespan. The conflict between celebrity and posthumous fame found here alerts us to potential routes for further research; to examine contemporaneous celebrity in contrast to afterlives.

There have been challenges with handling such an unwieldy body of material like the press; first, the vastness of the archive required careful management; second, identifying relevant newspapers within the archive; and third, despite its size, from the outset I understood that the extant archive is only partial. Part of my research process has been to develop strategies for approaching the archive, before even attempting to read and theorise it. The decision to focus on particular recurrent images, events and roles within each actresses' repertoire enabled me to concentrate my research. This helped the coherency of my argument and to show the possibilities of press coverage, but I by no means claim an exhaustive study of all possible readings of their press coverage: more meanings can be made.

My hope is that this research has opened up possibilities for using the press in both

[10] Margaret Jowett, *Candidate for Fame* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955); David Pownall, 'Sarah Siddons: Life in Five Sittings', *15 Minute Drama*, BBC Radio 4, 12-16 April 2010; Emma Donoghue, *Life Mask* (London: Virago, 2004).

eighteenth-century celebrity and theatre research, but not foreclosed other readings of the press about these actresses or others. Future work needs to incorporate press culture in much more vital ways; too frequently press material is used for convenience, to illustrate a point without interrogation of the biases or complexities of news writing. My contribution to the field is to showcase the importance of interrogating the press coverage, and not using it simply as illustrative material.

Actresses are unique cultural icons whose presence can command audiences across the centuries, as the 'First Actresses' exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2011 demonstrated. But, of course, enduring appeal is not the same as celebrity: their afterlives remind us about the peculiar hold actresses, that we cannot see perform, can wield. Celebrity, however, can tell us much about contemporary standards, contemporary audiences and contemporary media.

The media histories of Siddons, Farren and Wells mark the start of a celebrity system entwined with the press. Nineteenth-century innovations – photography, interviews, product advertisement – would continue to advance the ways in which actresses could be reached and reach out through the press. It is only recently that the periodical archive has been examined as a rich source for celebrity studies.

In November 1796, however, the *Monthly Mirror* assessed the concept of the public and public opinion. Rather than a concrete body, the writer proposes, the public is a 'chaotic abstract thing which is *called* the public'. Turning to its influence on the theatre, the writer observes:

> The dramatic public is just such a non-entity, which managers appear to reverence and obey; but their actual devotion and formal obedience is paid to what is indeed the virtual public, the conductors of our Journals; and the pretended idol of their worship is symbolized by certain stamped papers, being the name of Morning Chronicle, Morning Herald, Morning Post, Oracle, True Briton, Gazetteer, Telegraph, &c. The priests who officiate at this mock

> solemnity, are called Editors, Printers, Publishers, Clerks, &c. and the offerings are presented in the shape of Freedoms, Bones, Orders, and such other materials which the zeal of the worshipper may volunteer, or the avarice of the priest exact.[11]

The religious metaphor here is apt; we have seen before the comparison between public obsession with the theatre and its stars, and religious 'Enthusiasm'. Though it refers to theatrical culture more generally, the same criticisms might be taken for its role in the creation and circulation of celebrity identities.

Of course, we should read such criticisms with caution; the *Monthly Mirror* was, after all, part of that same media culture, and is clearly trying to demarcate itself against its competitors. Nevertheless, these lines direct our attention to a central concern in celebrity studies; the press's questionable ethics. Theatrical celebrity constituted a new kind of social order, sustained by a thriving emergent press. Though we might readily acknowledge the role of the media in contemporary celebrity-making, the lack of attention paid to the press in recent scholarship of historical celebrity is a testament to the way in which the press obscures its own role. And yet, as this paragraph suggests, the periodical press was recognised as the arbiter of taste and the real entity behind what is called the 'public'. For almost three decades eighteenth-century scholarship has recognised the presence of theatrical celebrity; it is time now to turn our attention to the periodical press that enabled it.

[11] 'Comparative Estimate of the Liberality—Companies—and Exertions of the Two Winter Theatres', in *The Monthly Mirror* (London: Thomas Bellamy, November 1796), pp. 431-32 (p. 431).

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Early English Newspapers [Microfilm], British Library London
John Larpent Plays, The Huntington Library, California on microfiche, British Library, London (MS Fiche 253/1-1297 and MS Fiche 254/1-1070)

PERIODICALS

Argus
Bell's Weekly Messenger
Craftsman or Say's Weekly Journal
Daily Advertiser
Daily Courant
Daily Gazetteer
Daily Journal
Diary, or Woodfall's Register
The European Magazine
Evening Mail
Gazetteer
General Advertiser
General Evening Post
The Gentleman's Magazine
Grub Street Journal
The Lady's Magazine
Lady's Monthly Museum
Lloyd's Evening Post
The Loiterer

London Chronicle
London Courant
London Daily Post
London Evening Post
London Packet
Middlesex Journal
The Monthly Mirror
Morning Chronicle
Morning Herald
Morning Post
Morning Star
Oracle. Bell's New World
Original Weekly Journal
Parker's General Advertiser
Post Boy
Public Advertiser
Public Ledger
The Rambler's Magazine
The Spectator
Star
St. James's Chronicle
The Tatler
The Theatrical Examiner
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