

Is She A Woman?: Alternative Critical Frameworks for Understanding Cross- Dressing and Cross-Gender Casting on the Victorian Stage

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Abstract

As the study of nineteenth-century theatre has expanded over the decades, the extent and popularity of cross-dressing and cross-gender casting on the Victorian stage is being revealed. Yet there is an enduring tendency in Victorian theatre criticism to situate transvestite performances within broad-brush assumptions of binary attitudes towards gender amongst theatre audiences. Universalised gender norms and assumptions of binary thinking have long been discarded in critical analysis of Victorian fiction, and their lingering influence on Victorian theatre studies has arguably been unhelpful. Building on the vital pioneering work of Jacky Bratton, this article will focus on the careers of Louisa Cranstoun Nisbett and Mary Anne Keeley, two prominent and acclaimed mid-century actresses, drawing on reviews, memoirs, and commentaries on their performances to attempt to construct alternative theories for how they were viewed and understood. The critical and popular success of their performances and the language and ideas employed by reviewers and commentators to record and explain them reveal far more flexible, multiple, fluid, complex, and imaginative attitudes to gender roles and identities than allowed for in established critical narratives.

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As the study of nineteenth-century theatre has expanded over the decades, the extent and popularity of cross-dressing and cross-gender casting on the Victorian stage is being revealed. Yet there is an enduring tendency in Victorian theatre criticism to situate transvestite performances within broad-brush assumptions of binary attitudes towards gender amongst theatre audiences. So, for example, the common practice of casting adult women to play vulnerable youths such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Jo the Crossing Sweeper in *Bleak House*, and Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* has repeatedly been glossed as a reluctance to associate weakness and passivity with masculinity; as Laurence Senelick suggests, 'More tears might be shed over a waif enacted by a woman (a victim by definition) than over a gangling youth, and the pathetic element was satisfactory substitute for verisimilitude in male impersonation.'¹ The notion that Victorian women were viewed as victims by definition is preposterous enough, but this theory makes even less sense given that these fictional characters originally appealed to readers without their embodiment by female performers to make their vulnerability acceptable. Charles Dickens's novels are inhabited by a host of suffering boys, from the young David Copperfield and *Oliver Twist* through to Bob Cratchit's Tiny Tim, and every helpless Little Nell is balanced out by a host of capable, active, and powerful women from Betsy Trotwood to Mrs Bagnet.

The wide-spread critical assumption that the Victorians viewed gender in strictly binary terms means that cross-cast performances that do not fit this paradigm are identified as remarkable and isolated exceptions to a supposed norm. Theatre historians have noted that actresses played Romeo and Hamlet throughout the nineteenth century, from Sarah Siddons through to Sarah Bernhardt. By 1899, Mrs Bandmann-Palmer was close to reaching a thousand performances as Hamlet in the provinces.² Various critics have explained the popularity of cross-cast Hamlets and Romeos by arguing that Victorian audiences did not see either role as truly masculine: in a society supposedly committed to starkly divided gender roles, Romeo's youthful rashness is characterised as too impulsive and uncontrolled to be aligned with adult masculinity and thus more suitable for an actress to embody; similarly, Hamlet's availability as a role for ambitious actresses is explained via a niche theory that he was truly a woman whose sex had been carefully concealed from birth but inescapably manifests in his reluctance to take action.³ The popular and critical acclaim secured by the American actress Charlotte Cushman in the 1840s with a repertoire that encompassed Romeo, Hamlet, Claude Melnotte, and Cardinal Wolsey alongside female roles such as Lady Macbeth, Queen Katherine, and Meg Merrilies has similarly been framed as an extraordinary exception to prevailing gender norms; so Elizabeth Mullenix has identified Cushman as an 'androgynous' with the 'power to transcend gender boundaries, . . . and to introduce a third sphere or alternative space of possibility for women to rival traditional conceptions of True Womanhood.'⁴

Universalised gender norms and assumptions of binary thinking have long been discarded in critical analysis of Victorian fiction, and their lingering influence on Victorian theatre studies has arguably been unhelpful. As Jacky Bratton has advised, cross-gender casting and cross-dressed performances need to be viewed in contextualised and historically contingent ways; so she explains:

the enactment of the male by women seems to me to be always specific to the immediate, historical negotiations of interpersonal power through gender. Women, in other words, perform on stage in male clothes, or parts or versions of male clothing, for various reasons and with extremely different effects at different points in the history of the actress.⁵

As Leslie Ferris has observed, such performances are too complex to be reduced to single critical readings or summed up in generalisations. Alluding to Roland Barthes' concept of the 'writerly text' in his *S/Z* (1970), she posits that

transvestite theatre – cross-dressing in performance – is an exemplary source of the writerly text, a work that forces the reader/spectator to see multiple meanings in the very act of reading itself, of listening, watching a performance. [...] We are forced to concede to multiple meanings, to ambiguities of thought, feeling, categorization, to refuse closure.⁶

More open, fluid, and multiple critical frameworks are therefore needed to aid our understanding of cross-dressed and cross-gendered performances on the Victorian stage.

Building on the vital pioneering work of Jacky Bratton, this article will focus on the careers of Louisa Cranstoun Nisbett and Mary Anne Keeley, two prominent and acclaimed mid-century actresses, drawing on reviews, memoirs, and commentaries on their performances to attempt to construct alternative theories for how they were viewed and understood. Louisa Nisbett was renowned for the charm, vivacity, and humour of her cross-dressed 'breeches roles', while Mary Keeley was famed for the realism, vigour, and pathos with which she embodied both male and female characters. The critical and popular success of their performances and the language and ideas employed by reviewers and commentators to record and explain them reveal far more flexible, multiple, fluid, complex, and imaginative attitudes to gender roles and identities than allowed for in established critical narratives. As the responses to these actresses demonstrate, binary notions of gender did not dominate or determine the reception of their performances, which took place in a multifarious, playful, and unpredictable landscape of attitudes and practices.

Eliza Nisbett was born in 1812, and by 1830 she had established herself in a repertoire of breeches roles, cross-dressing in the guise of young officers, sailors, fops, and gentlemen. In some of these roles, such as Julian, the madcap seafaring hero of George Soan's *The Young Reefer* (1835), Nisbett played a man – and was praised for looking 'as tight a seaman as any the navy can produce'.⁷ In others she played women who assumed a male disguise for a host of often unlikely reasons: in *Catching an Heiress* (1835) it was to teach two insolent officers a lesson; in *The Volunteers* (1835) it was to fight the French with a fair troop of Highland women; in *Sons and Systems* (1838) she put on breeches in order to

flatter her prospective in-laws into permitting her to marry her fiancé. Though Nisbett was repeatedly praised for assuming an officer's uniform with 'a natural air that no lady we ever saw on the stage came at all near to', portraits of her in various male guises make it clear that seamless male impersonation was not the effect aimed at – rather, the cinched waists and full-skirted coats and tunics offered an attractive form of drag – the 'almost but not quite right' gender performance that offers a sufficient illusion to sustain the notion that other characters are deceived while offering a knowing wink to the audience.⁸

The standard critical framework used to explain and interpret breeches roles has been that of the male gaze and the sexualised – or in Kirsten Pullen's terms 'hypersexualized' – display of the actress's legs and body.⁹ The repertoire of Louisa Nisbett suggests instead that female-to-male drag is a potentially more valuable critical lens through which to view many such performances. Drag, with its connotations of de-naturalising, reifying, and parodying gender norms, fits neatly with the recurring challenges to masculine complacency in Nisbett's cross-dressing repertoire, within which Nisbett repeatedly undermined male authority, mocked the totemic male ritual of the duel and disrupted notions of gender hierarchy – a dynamic that was not confined to her breeches roles but bled into and inflected her 'cis-gendered' and 'cis-dressed' roles.

Female cross-dressing was clearly a conduit for challenging and debating masculinity in a trio of plays in which Nisbett made her name in the 1830s: the 1834 revival of Samuel Beazley's 1816 operetta *Is He Jealous?*, and two new plays by Charles Selby, *The Married Rake* (1835) and *The Rifle Brigade* (1838). In each of these plays, a wife is troubled by an overly or insufficiently jealous husband, who variously torments or neglects her, either questioning her every move or too lost in study or infidelity to give her a second thought. Nisbett plays the unhappy wife's friend or sister who then dresses herself as a handsome officer and makes love to the wife before her husband's eyes, with all the attendant possibilities for comedy and polysemous desire – the erotically teased and pleased gaze here is not necessarily male or heterosexual as audiences of *The Rifle Brigade*, for example, were treated to Nisbett's mustachioed rifleman 'waxing rather warm' with her female friend.¹⁰ In all three plays, the angry husband then threatens the supposed lover with violence, only to be met with Nisbett's amused *sang froid*; she behaves with cool daring as the husband blusters and quails, the cross-dressed woman offering the superior performance of masculine heroism and martial confidence. Thus, in *The Married Rake*, the unfaithful Mr Flighty surprises Mrs Trictrac, dressed as a cavalry officer, apparently making love to his wife:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Mrs. Trictrac. | Your husband! Flighty, my dear fellow, how are you? |
| Flighty. (<i>Aside</i> .) | Curse his impudence! Sir—madam—allow me to observe that I—you—she—he—my—conduct—is—scandalous—shameful—damnable! I'm not a man—I— |
| Mrs. Trictrac. | What? |
| Flighty. | I'm not a man, I say—to be insulted with impunity. I'm a fool—an ass—an idiot— |
| Mrs. Trictrac. | I know you are. |

- Flighty. Don't interrupt me, sir. I say I'm a fool not to have suspected—you deceitful woman—you damned puppy! Don't laugh, or I'll throw you out of the window! Leave the room, madam. [*Exit Mrs. Flighty, R. H. D.*] I insist on immediate satisfaction. Here is a case of pistols. (*Trying to open it.*) I'll shoot you, sir—I'll blow you to atoms!
- Mrs. Trictrac. Fire away, my boy—I'm not afraid of you or your pistol case. Why don't you produce your weapons, if you intend to blow me to atoms? Do it at once—I'm quite ready. Don't keep me waiting; you've no idea how valuable my time is.
- Flighty. Confound it, I've lost my keys! I can't open the case.¹¹

As Flighty's self-command and authority dissipate into spluttering dismay, Mrs Trictrac plans where she will aim her shot when they duel, further instilling terror in her victim by declaring herself 'famous for bringing down my man' and 'very fond of *killing*' (16) – double-entendres that neatly align female sexual agency with male military prowess. Flighty's humiliation is complete when the maid enters disguised as his mistress, Lady Simple, and pretends to go into hysterics, swiftly followed by Mrs Flighty and then Mrs Trictrac, who has resumed her female identity. Pulled to and fro by three screaming, fainting women, Flighty admits himself defeated and ready to join them: 'Damme, there's a trio! I must faint myself, and make up a quartette.' (20) Flighty surrenders, and, concerned to preserve his public image, he apologises to his wife and accepts the terms set by Mrs Trictrac for his future behaviour rather than have his humiliation made public. Masculinity, just like femininity, is a performance in *The Married Rake* – and Nisbett's Mrs Trictrac is better at performing both.

In all three plays Louisa Nisbett played a woman who offers a more assured and stylish performance of masculinity than her male victim, and all three end with the husband humbled and brought in line – 'tamed', as Nisbett's significantly named 'Mrs Masterman' declares in *The Rifle Brigade*, and 'so gentle that I can drive him with a snaffle'.¹² These plays critiqued errant forms of masculinity, disciplining and displacing them with female authority.¹³

There was a seamless intertheatrical dialogue between Nisbett's breeches roles and her 'straight' repertoire of comic and romantic leads. A crucial connection was formed by William Collier's 1836 comedy *Is She A Woman?*, in which the central role of the gender non-conforming Lady Caroline Butler was written specifically for Nisbett. Lady Caroline's betrothed, Captain Charles Cleveland, is angered when she chooses to go out hunting rather than greet him when he arrives to visit after a five-year absence. Caroline is condemned by Charles for galloping all over the country to 'exhibit' her face, and by his servant Frank as a 'masculine perverter of petticoats'.¹⁴ Caroline's effeminate brother Hector, who has been brought up by a maiden aunt, is dismissed by Frank as 'A mere butterfly, sir – as *small an apology for a man* as I ever saw in a pair of indispensables'. (7) Charles's cure for the siblings' gender non-conformity is to trick his uncle into believing that brother and sister have switched clothes and each is in cross-dressed disguise. Caroline and Hector are each amused to see the other mistaken for the opposite

sex but outraged and upset by their own treatment. When Caroline threatens to shoot Charles or Frank, Hector finds his inner 'British lion' is roused and he takes up the challenge to defend the family honour, taking Charles aback and prompting him to vow that 'I'll never take a man by his looks again'. (24, 25) When Caroline replaces her muddy hunting clothes with a beautiful silk dress, Charles is entranced and apologises abjectly for the unnecessary humiliation he has visited upon her. At which point, the play's second volta takes place as she declares to Charles, 'In truth, my habits are now formed. I am a decided enemy to soft and tender occupations, and like to live free and unrestrained, according to the bent of my humour.' (27) At which Charles abandons all attempts to change his beloved and declares that hunting together will be a joy. Far from being a corrective, the play celebrates the siblings' unconventional behaviour, or, as the *Observer's* reviewer put it, 'The fault of the piece is that the Captain has failed in his object; the young lady being in the end rather confirmed in her "field" propensities.'¹⁵

Is She A Woman? openly questions gender identification and its inherently theatrical and insubstantial nature, inviting the audience to view the cis-dressed siblings as though they were in drag. When Charles pretends to believe that Caroline is Hector in a dress, he critiques her unconvincing performance of femininity:

- CHA: Now, *you* have been too careless with your part, for even had I not been informed of the trick, I should have found you out in an instant. [*Laughs – touches her in the side.*]
- LADY C: How devilish clever you are. [*Walks about stage in a fury.*]
- CHA: That's it; why that is the very way your Sister should have acted her part – bravo! excellent! keep it up! go along!
- LADY C: I shall go mad!
- CHA: Now, if *you* had only played *your* part half as well, you *might* have passed for a woman.
- LADY C: Passed for a woman! who dares to say I'm not one? [*Stamps her foot with rage.*]
- CHA: Why you betray yourself with your violence, did any one ever see a *woman* stamp and rave in such a manner! (19-20)

Once the couple has reconciled, Charles is by contrast delighted when Caroline emphasises her desire for him to remain by stamping her foot – male-defined norms of femininity are clearly arbitrary and irrational. Thus, when Nisbett comes before the audience at the final curtain in her own persona to declare that 'I have so often appeared before you as one of "*The Lords of Creation*," I think it is as well to inform you that I have no wish to be taken for anything but a woman, and one who's [*sic*] sole ambition is to please her friends' (30), the effect is less reassuring than disruptive – the very need to confirm the actress's sex implying that the drama's playful disruptions have leaked out into the audience, undermining their confidence in their ability to identify male and female.

Nisbett's subsequent roles were predicated on and in conversation with her performance as Lady Caroline Butler, in particular Caroline's speech in celebration of the joys of the hunt that wins her approbation as 'a true sportsman' (14) even from those who believe

her to be man in a dress. Nisbett's most famous and celebrated role, Constance in Sheridan Knowles's comedy *The Love Chase* (1837), drew on her performance as Lady Caroline and included a set-piece encomium on the glories of the hunt – but in a markedly different context. Knowles's Constance is a wilful minx in love with her awkward neighbour Wildrake, whom she mocks in Beatrice-and-Benedick-style for his countrified manners. Disguising herself as a huntswoman, complete with weather-beaten colouring, Constance teases Wildrake for his obsession with horses and hounds. Constance is an elegant townswoman who ends the play happily betrothed to Wildrake, but she remains untamed. In the closing moments, Wildrake asks for her hand and she complies by giving him a slap – an assault in which, as a reviewer noted of Nisbett's performance in 1847, 'there was no want of impulse', leaving the actor playing Wildrake to long for the moment when 'he gets the brown paper and vinegar to his cheek to cool the tingling left by the lady's fingers'.¹⁶

Nisbett's next most successful role was the wonderfully named Lady Gay Spanker, building upon both Lady Caroline and Constance, it was custom-made for her by Dion Boucicault in his 1841 hit *London Assurance*. Gay is the sexy, vibrant heart of the play, her presence first signaled by Nisbett's trademark musical laugh, she is described by her friend Grace as 'glee made a living thing'.¹⁷ Entering in riding habit, Gay delivers a paean to the glories of the hunt that holds her audience enraptured and climaxes,

Horse, man, hound, earth, heaven!—all—all—one piece of glowing ecstasy! Then I love the world, myself, and every living thing,—a jocund soul cries out for very glee, as it could wish that creation had but one mouth that I might kiss it. (42)

To which an entranced Sir Harcourt responds, 'I wish I were the mouth!' (42) Gay is not just desirable but irresistible, seducing the ageing Sir Harcourt away from her young friend Grace, who is then free to marry her chosen lover.

Continuing the dramatised debate on gender roles, authority, and desire that stretches across Nisbett's previous roles, *London Assurance* makes gender non-conformity unapologetically sexy. Gay dominates her diminutive husband Adolphus, dubbed by her 'My Dolly', who is not a henpecked husband but a man who glories in and depends upon his wife's power; as a friend summarises their relationship, 'She married him for freedom, and she has it; he married her for protection, and he has it.' (44) The other men are put out by Dolly's submissiveness and make mischief for their own ends, exhorting him to 'remember your gender' (72) and thereby involving him in a duel. Amused by her husband's unwonted show of spirit, Gay shows genuine heartache when she fears for his life, and in her relief, she promises to give up hunting should he wish it – to which he replies, 'No, no—do what you like—say what you like, for the future! I find the head of a family has less ease and more responsibility than I, as a member, could have anticipated. I abdicate!' (82) Lady Gay was written to exploit the gender-playful charm of Louisa Nisbett, while Adolphus was tailored to the skills of the diminutive comedian, Bob Keeley. Keeley's display of uxorious but 'not unmanly' pride (in the words of Charles Dickens) was admiringly described by the *Observer's* critic:

how perfect was his picture of awkward, unobtrusive, conscious insignificance – how delicious his agonies of clumsy bashfulness! And then, after his reconciliation with his tremendous wife, with what an air of gratified importance did he encircle with his arm Mrs. Nisbett's slim waist, and with what a sublime strut did he parade her round the room, every look, every movement seeming to say, "Ah, this is my wife, rather fine woman, eh? and not run off yet – no, no, not exactly."¹⁸

The play's unconventional gender roles still had power to disturb 160 years later, when the *Sunday Times*'s critic John Peter blanched at Fiona Shaw's Lady Gay, describing her as 'one of those magnificent Englishwomen who are menacingly sexy, but seem to be more husband than wife'.¹⁹

Reviewers repeatedly likened Nisbett to Euphrosyne, the goddess of mirth, and her charm, beauty, and gentility were clearly crucial in securing critical approval for a repertoire of roles in which she questioned gender hierarchies and parodied gender norms.²⁰ Even Nisbett, however, could push her critique of masculinity too far. In the role of the slang-talking Eton schoolboy, Lord Bellamont, in Catherine Gore's *Quid Pro Quo; or, The Day of Dupes* (1844), a model of male entitlement, his head empty of ancient Greek and full of self-importance, Nisbett drew critical opprobrium alongside the play's author for overstepping the appropriate bounds of her sex. Nisbett's skill in the role was unquestioned – the *Age*'s critic lamented that her 'Eton boy was so true and "slangy" that we were quite angry with her for so ably unsexing herself' – but her drag performance was judged unseemly, alongside that of Gore, who had anonymously beaten ninety-six other playwrights to the prize.²¹ In the play's Epilogue Nisbett metatheatrically asked the audience's indulgence for having 'Assumed a garment so indecorous', and promised that if 'their generous hearts protection yield / Whene'er – where'er – a woman takes the field', the women would gratefully return the favour 'QUID PRO QUO!'²² No such indulgence was forthcoming; as the *Illustrated London News* fulminated, 'if ladies will write such things and ladies play such *smoking* parts as the Etonian Gamin, if vulgarity rudely turn out politeness, and coarse thoughts garbed in bad grammar take precedence of refined idea – why then indeed, farewell to comedy.'²³ Even Nisbett's charm had its limits.

If the critical paradigm of the male gaze and the cross-dressed actress as sexual object is inadequate to the playfully disruptive dynamics of Louisa Nisbett's drag and cis-dressed performances, it is even more inadequate – or downright inappropriate – as a framework for understanding Mary Keeley's repertoire of cross-cast roles. Born in 1805, Keeley began like Nisbett with a series of comic burlesque and breeches roles, cross-dressing as clerks and schoolboys. It was in 1838 that her acting career reached a new artistic highpoint with her performance as the abused youth Smike in Edward Stirling's adaptation of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. Over the next three decades Keeley was celebrated for the striking realism of her performances in a range of male and female roles including the house-breaker Jack Sheppard, Dickens's Clemency Newcombe and Oliver Twist, and Topsy in an adaptation of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The sexualised male gaze is not a productive frame for understanding her career – indeed, when Mary Keeley resorted to burlesque tights and tunic in *Valentine*

and *Orson* to boost audiences at the Lyceum under her management in 1844, she met with critical disapproval for debasing her art. As one critic complained,

Truth and nature are no longer dominant ingredients of her performance. Detestable burlesque has dulled in her all delicacy of perception, leaving for substitute, something we will not trust ourselves to describe. Mrs. Keeley's talent needs no aid from a personal exhibition, only tolerated by custom, in an opera dancer...²⁴

Where Nisbett's cross-dressing was knowing, performative drag, Mary Keeley's was closer to the serious business of 'passing', in which the gap between the sex of actor and role was elided in a seamless and unselfconscious performance.

The first moments of Keeley's performance as Smike were not auspicious, as she recounted to her adoring biographer Walter Goodman. Dressed as the realisation of Cruikshank's illustrations of the abused nineteen-year-old boy, limbs protruding from outgrown clothes, she emerged from darkness at the back of the stage:

My costume was certainly very odd, and as I had recently been playing in many comic parts, I suppose they expected something funny from me. The house evidently thought that the scene was intended to be comic rather than pathetic, and there were roars of laughter. But I had never before lost my presence of mind on the stage, and I didn't mean to do it now. So I stood it out. But it was the most difficult task I ever had. However, when I spoke the first lines of my part the laughter ceased, and there was a dead silence. Then a stifled sob reached my ear, and presently I could see there was scarcely a dry eye in the house. After that I felt the character!²⁵

The task of conveying the physical and emotional reality of the Squeers' abuse of the children in their care lay almost entirely with Keeley. Her dialogue was minimal, especially after some painfully sentimental lines were cut at Dickens's request. The headmaster's dishonesty was exploited to comic effect elsewhere in the play, so the task of conveying the human damage inflicted by his brutality rested on Keeley's physical embodiment of the maimed boy – a challenge she met with extraordinary success, as the *Sunday Times* marveled:

It is impossible to speak too highly of Mrs. Keeley's extraordinary representation of the buffeted, ill-used *Smike* – the creature, whose intellect has been clouded, and whose spirit has been broken down, by long continued oppression. From her all the loveliness of youth has departed; that buoyancy of spirit that is the life of life, had been withered by want, and obliterated by cruelty, and she moved and spoke like one to whom hope was unknown. The wan look, the scarcely audible voice, the dragged limbs, and the fear-taught tremulousness of the boy, were presented with a truth only too painful; every tone of her voice was a "blow of the heart"...²⁶

Nonetheless, no matter how 'real' the illusion Keeley commanded – and the *Sunday Times* review suggests a palpable physical response to the emotional power of her

representation – this is not ‘passing’ because the audience was necessarily aware of the actress’s sex. Indeed, Stirling made use of the dual consciousness of actress and role and the gap that lay between them. In Act II, scene 1 of Stirling’s dramatisation, Smike has followed Nicholas on the road to London when they encounter the rough-mannered local John Browdie with whom Nicholas had previously quarreled over a card game. The macho jostling of the night before transforms into tacit expressions of mutual respect as Browdie is moved to give his savings to Nicholas, inspired by admiration for his thrashing of Squeers:

BROWDIE: Five shillings for two lads to walk up to Lunnun wi’, 190 wearisome miles – No I’m dang’d if they shall while John Browdie’s gotten a golden guinea in his t’ould leather purse – (*pulling out a shabby purse and offering it to NICHOLAS*) There he be, lad – tak as much as likes mun.

NICHOLAS: You are too kind –

BROWDIE: Too koind – pack a stuff – bean’t it duty of one mon to assist another? If every body – would stick to that – there wouldn’t be quite so much mischief done in’t world – tak’ eneaf to carry thee whoam – thee’lt pay me yan day a’ warrant –

NICHOLAS: I will not refuse your generous-hearted kindness (*taking money*) a sovereign will be quite enough.

BROWDIE: One – dong it lad tak’ one a piece –

NICHOLAS: No – thank you, one will be sufficient for both –

BROWDIE: If thee won’t ha it, t’other chap shall – here – Smike here be one for thee –

SMIKE (*taking money and giving it to NICHOLAS*) Both for you! – ha! ha! ²⁷

As Smike exits literally holding on to Nicholas’s coat-tails, Keeley’s sex underlined the damaged youth’s marginalisation in this scene of camaraderie and male-bonding. Denied mature manhood by his childhood abuse, the irreversibility of the damage inflicted on Smike by years of cruelty and deprivation was emphasised by Keeley’s casting.

In October 1839, less than a year after her premiere as Smike, Mary Keeley appeared in her most famous stage role, the titular Jack Sheppard, in J. B. Buckstone’s adaptation of Harrison Ainsworth’s 1839 novel. Buckstone’s was the sixth stage adaptation to appear on the London stage, and it was to outlast all its competitors, largely thanks to Keeley’s acclaimed performance. In advance of the play’s opening reviewers speculated that Keeley’s casting aimed to soften and distance the criminality of the notorious house-breaker – ‘Mrs. Keeley cannot be put into the revolting situations that a man might be’, predicted the *Sunday Times* – and modern critics have given similarly dismissive interpretations of the relation between actress and role.²⁸ Certainly, Buckstone’s script was structured to elide Jack’s malfeasance and to highlight his courage and resourcefulness, deliberately raising and then dispelling doubts about his loyalty; so, for example, Jack is seen to blame his innocent fellow-apprentice for committing a theft of which he himself is guilty, only for it to be revealed later that Jack had Darrell arrested in order to keep him safe from would-be assassins. Once the play opened, however, it was the extraordinary

verisimilitude of Keeley's performance that struck reviewers. Those who noted her sex did so only to marvel at her ability to transcend it. In the words of the *Sunday Times*, Keeley 'realized an impossibility':

This appears like an Irish-ism, but is none: for her, or any one like her, to represent *Jack* was an impossibility till the 28th of last month, when she achieved it. From first to last her performance was faultless; we never heard anything so boyishly blackguard, and yet so admirable, as her song –

The carpenter's daughter was fair and free.

The reckless daring, sudden relenting, infirmity of purpose, depth of love, and strength of will, were all marked out with the most undeniable reality.²⁹

Dressed as the living embodiment of Cruikshank's illustrations to the novel in short-cropped wig, broad-skirted coat, and knee-breeches, Keeley amazed audiences with the skill and athleticism of her performance: planing wood, dexterously pick-pocketing, fighting, dancing, singing, and leaping across rooftops – all performed in real-time to leave the actress exhausted as she took her bows.³⁰ Keeley trained carefully to achieve the physical realism of her performance, being instructed in carpentry and boxing, and securing real prison manacles from which she painfully squeezed her hands in full view of the footlights each night. She set new standards for physical realism which few could match; the *Theatrical Journal* contemptuously compared Keeley's 'truly painful acting' with a Jack Sheppard in Peterborough who simply 'turned his back to the audience, and most vigorously wriggled about his "bustle part," when lo! his hands were free', prompting the reviewer to view his hanging as just punishment.³¹

Verisimilitude was a vital element in the success of Buckstone's *Jack Sheppard* and the lead performer's sex was not a hindrance. Consciousness of Mary Keeley's sex only fed into admiration for the accuracy of her embodiment of Jack and how she bridged the gap of age and gender with both the physical virtuosity of her performance and its emotional conviction. Reviewers complimented Keeley on her representation of Jack's inner life, the 'development of character in the jealousy of Jack, his sullen and dogged resentment, his alacrity when kindly spoken to, and his vindictiveness.'³² As with SMIKE, Keeley's ability to embody the gulf between what could have been and what is, between lost potential and wounded reality, was key to the pathos evoked by her performances.

Unlikely though it may seem, the performance that next won Keeley most acclaim for its physical and emotional verisimilitude was the black-face role of Topsy, the abused nine-year-old slave-girl in Mark Lemon and Tom Taylor's dramatisation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – a role in which Keeley premiered in 1852 at the age of forty-seven. Lemon and Taylor's adaptation was one of the most radical versions of Stowe's novel. As critics have noted, the play realises the subversive potential in Topsy, the abandoned and brutalised child whose wildness and self-declared 'wickedness' are clearly framed as the result of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.³³ The adapters rewrote the plot of the

novel to give its black female characters more active and assertive roles. Topsy is shown kindness and given a sense of self-worth not by the white child Eva but by her fellow slave Eliza. Topsy in turn warns Eliza of her impending sale and helps her to run away. When Eliza is captured, Topsy dresses as a gun-toting boy and poses as George Harris's slave, helping to bring mother and child to freedom.

For all that Mary Keeley was a declared opponent of slavery, her portrayal of Topsy was inevitably tainted by racist stereotyping and in particular the influence of minstrelsy, as was her reception: the 'reality' against which her performance of Topsy was measured was necessarily shaped by the same assumptions and perceptions. Taking this fully into account, Keeley's performance as Topsy can nonetheless be viewed alongside her portrayal of Smike as a politically infused portrait of damaged humanity. Greeting Keeley's Topsy as 'this most original of modern creations', the *Observer's* critic exclaimed in admiration:

Topsy was paramount. No one, perhaps, was prepared for the effect Mrs. Keeley produced in this part on her first entering. The half-naked black girl, with her wild elf-locks, her coarse brown holland *chemise*, her ivory teeth, her shambling gait, her incessant twitchings and scratchings, and her general expression of abjectness and scepticism as to the possibility of kindness, formed a picture almost too real. But as she awoke to sympathy, and her hitherto crushed intelligence began to revive, and she finally developed into the affectionate friend, the fine powers of this accomplished actress developed themselves to perfection.³⁴

The emotional force of Keeley's performance was rooted once again in a vision of thwarted potential, and the physical and psychological damage inflicted on a vulnerable child.

Keeley's audiences were, of course, aware of the gap between the white woman in her late forties and the young black girl she represented on stage. Reviewers marveled at Keeley's ability to bring Topsy to life on stage, but the formulas they employed to describe the performance suggest that the gap between actress and role was not just a disjunction to be elided but an active part of the meaning-making mechanism of the drama. Lemon and Taylor's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, like Stirling's *Nicholas Nickleby* and to a lesser extent Buckstone's *Jack Sheppard*, was a play centrally concerned with cruelty, violence, and neglect on both an institutional and an individual level. As with the novels from which they derived, appeals were made to audiences' and readers' compassion, inviting them to connect the fictional suffering depicted to the real-world failings that the works reflected. As George Eliot expounded in her famous essay 'The Natural History of German Life', sympathy was the key mechanism on which her theories on the value of realist art rested:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. [...] [A] picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.³⁵

Two decades later, George Henry Lewes added actors to the great artists who can prompt this attention and its attendant exchange of sympathies. Distinguishing the actor of genius from the merely conventional actor, Lewes explained,

[T]he success of the personation will depend upon the vividness of the actor's sympathy, and his honest reliance on the truth of his own individual expression, in preference to the conventional expressions which may be accepted on the stage. This is the great actor, the creative artist. The conventional artist is one who either, because he does not feel the vivid sympathy, or cannot express what he feels, or has not sufficient energy of self-reliance to trust frankly to his own expressions, cannot *be* the part, but tries to *act* it, and is thus necessarily driven to adopt those conventional means of expression with which the traditions of the stage abound.³⁶

Just as Eliot theorised that sympathy and accurate observation were crucial to the creation of realist art and its ability in turn to command the receiver's attention and spark their sympathies, so did Lewes theorise a parallel dynamic of sympathetic exchange between actor and audience:

It is the actor's art to express in well-known symbols what an individual man may be supposed to feel, and we, the spectators, recognizing these expressions, are thrown into a state of sympathy. Unless the actor follows nature sufficiently to select symbols that are recognized as natural, he fails to touch us.³⁷

The gap between actor and role thus becomes a measure of the power of sympathy to bridge it – both the actor's sympathetic observation and embodiment of their subject and the audience's appreciative sympathy awakened in response to their performance. Keeley's ability to span compassionately the gap between herself and the pitiable beings she embodied was thus an active part of the moral and emotional dynamics of the performance, a living demonstration of the drama's sympathetic processes. It was in these terms that contemporary critics viewed Mary Keeley, not just as an actor of Dickensian roles but as an artistic equivalent to the novelist himself:

This is consummate genius, and genius which is recognised as soon as it is seen; for our admiration is excited by seeing vividly portrayed and brought before us a thousand little natural touches, which we must all have noticed, but upon which we have probably never bestowed a second thought until reminded of their existence by the artist before us. It was upon the perfection of his keen "perception" that Dickens originally founded his fame, and Mrs. Keeley, in her particular art, enjoys the same gift.³⁸

Cecil Pembroke celebrated Keeley's powers in the same terms in the *Theatrical Journal* in 1854: 'Her Topsy is perfect. No one better knows how to depict in all its shattered humanity, a poor neglected, ignorant outcast of society, than Mrs. Keeley . . . What Dickens [*sic*] on paper Mrs. Keeley is on the stage'.³⁹ Notably, a similar formula was used fifty years later by contemporary commentators for another supreme male impersonator, the music-hall

singer Vesta Tilley. W. R. Titterton declares of Tilley's creation, the 30-bob clerk Bertie, that he has 'the deep truth of uncynical humour. Dickens could have written a story round this fellow and called him Mr Guppy.'⁴⁰ Titterton further recognises the consciousness of Tilley's sex as a vital factor in the artistic dynamic of her performances; when she speaks the perfect optical illusion is broken, 'or, rather, the optical illusion continues, only there is another person present – the woman artist who unfolds the tale.'⁴¹ The verisimilitude of Tilley's male impersonations was inflected by the knowledge that it was the product of her sympathetic observation, the tenderness she felt for the men she created, as M. Willson Disher explained, 'she understood them better than they did themselves. That is why we saw them, not as we could see them in real life but as they were when viewed through a clever woman's eyes.'⁴²

Consciousness of the gap between actor and role and the sympathetic genius exercised to bridge that gap as part of the play's meaning-making potential is one possible critical framework through which to view Mary Keeley's cross-dressed and cross-racial performances, just as female-to-male drag with its self-conscious highlighting of the performativity of gender roles is a possible framework for understanding the cross-dressed performances and repertoire of Louisa Nisbett. This is not to assert that these are the exclusive or necessarily 'correct' frameworks within which to interpret these performances. On the contrary, many other critical frameworks and approaches are appropriate and productive. The variety, fluidity, and complexity of transvestite performance renders any one critical approach inadequate. Any one performance is open to multiple interpretations, responses, and conceptual framings, and a single viewer may move between conceptions and experience more than one emotion, idea, or response not only in the course of a performance but at any one moment. Multiple critical frameworks are required to begin to encompass the richness of Victorian cross-dressed and cross-cast performances and the ways in which they moved across gender boundaries, discussing, complicating, and questioning the relation between sex and gender.

Responses to cross-gender performances repeatedly show reviewers comfortably disavowing sex and gender and moving far beyond simple binary-thinking. In reviews, attributes and qualities were frequently gendered as masculine and feminine but without being tied to male or female performers or characters. Critics of Mary Keeley's cross-dressed performance as Jack Sheppard commended her remarkable ability to communicate traits and characteristics such as energy, boldness, mischief, determination, and gallantry, and it was her ability to express these qualities that made her the most accomplished and convincing embodiment of the young housebreaker. G. H. Lewes similarly neatly summed up the different stage presences of the Keeleys: '[Bob] Keeley was like a fat, happy, self-satisfied puppy, taking life easily, ready to get sniffing and enjoyment out of everything. Mrs. Keeley was like a sprightly kitten, eager to make a mouse of every moving thing.'⁴³ It was these stage qualities that dictated the roles they took in Edward Stirling's dramatisation of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1844, Mary Keeley playing the impudent boot-boy Young Bailey, while her husband took the role of the drunken midwife Sairey Gamp – a choice that was seen as entirely natural by reviewers, including the *Age's* critic, who commented approvingly,

Mrs. Keeley's Bailey was the delight of the house. Shrewd, sly, intelligent little cockney – witty, and fully aware of the fact – knowing and assuming the innocence of a babe – the *beau ideal* of a “tiger” – the essence of premature assurance, slang, and precocious boyhood. Mr. Keeley appeared as Mrs. Gamp, the nurse – vampire, and provoking lump of deceitful flesh, that had outlived every good attribute of woman in her lowest and most vulgar state. Mr. Keeley was very perfect in his delivery – perfect to all the *imperfection* of the old cat in sheep's clothing. [. . .] The natural drollery peculiar to this popular actor exhibited “Sairey Gamp” in the best possible light, relieving her of certain hateful qualities, and obtaining for her roars of applause from the audience.⁴⁴

Described by Lewes as ‘drollery personified’, it was this quality of openly relishing his sensuality that made Bob Keeley the ideal actor to render Gamp's drunken deceit more amusing than despicable.⁴⁵

This sense that it was an individual player's qualities and attributes rather than their biological sex that determined their suitability for roles was particularly apparent in English reviewers' responses to American actress Charlotte Cushman, whose performances were widely acclaimed for a combination of tenderness and passionate intensity. Recognised from the start as possessing ‘*masculine* energy and determination of purpose’, the intelligence, earnestness, daring, and abandon of her stage presence were qualities that were seen by many critics as rendering her better suited to many male than female roles.⁴⁶ A critic in the *Musical World* remarked that Romeo suited the actress's talents to perfection because ‘All the asperities and angularities of her acting appear to have been doffed with her female attire, and though the want of grace is still observable, it is not so obtrusive in Romeo as in her female characters, as neither dignity nor grandeur is demanded in the personation of the love-sick Montague. Miss Cushman has not here to contend to elevate herself by unnatural efforts, but to allow the predominant influences of the lover's character, intensity of passion and of the keenest susceptibility, to pervade her mind and sway her in performance.’⁴⁷ ‘Masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are not qualities here that map easily onto male and female, as critics regularly displayed an impressive openness to gender-fluid casting, putting greater emphasis on the performer's particular skills and stage presence than on any concern with the notional binary of gender.

A further recurring rationale referred to by Victorian reviewers was that of ownership, an association between a well-loved role and the performer who was popularly perceived as having made it their particular property – as Constance in *The Love Chase* was forever associated with Louisa Nisbett. Such ‘ownership’ could apparently be passed down through the family in an inheritance that took little notice of male and female lines. Bob Keeley made the role of Peter Spyk, the slow-witted labourer gradually awakened to love in J. R. Planché's *The Loan of a Lover* (1834), peculiarly his own, delighting audiences and critics with the ‘grandeur’ of his ‘intellectual vacancy’.⁴⁸ Two decades after Eliza Vestris and then Mary Keeley had played Gertrude, the young woman whom Bob Keeley's Peter slowly realises he desires, the Keeleys' daughter Louisa made her stage debut in the role opposite her father reprising his famous role. In March 1858 Louise made her London debut in her mother's original role of Gertrude, while opposite

her 'Mrs. Keeley played, as no one else except her husband could play it, the part of *Peter Spyk*.'⁴⁹ The lead roles in *The Loan of a Lover* thus seem to be family property in the view of the Keeleys and their critics who accepted the particular merits of each performer without expressing any concerns about age, gender or family relation.

All these possible critical frameworks and dynamics move far beyond the simple gender binaries that have long been applied to Victorian performance or assumed as the norm to which certain performances are identified as remarkable exceptions. Cross-dressed and cross-cast performances were a familiar and accepted feature of Victorian theatre, and whether engaging playfully in performative drag or showcasing the powers of sympathetic observation and embodiment, they evoked, explored, and questioned the complex, unpredictable and unstable relation between sex and gender. Together these various uses and approaches to cross-dressed and cross-gender casting add up to a sophisticated and multifarious range of theatrical techniques and strategies employed by Victorian theatre-makers and performers. The relation between the biological sex and the gender identity of performers and roles was part of the meaning-making of Victorian theatre. The creative relation between actors, roles, and gender identities in the Victorian theatre perhaps most closely resembles contemporary practices in colour-conscious casting, where theatres have moved beyond the naivety of colour-blind casting to take into account the reality of actors' bodies and identities in a multitude of thoughtful, imaginative, playful, and politically significant ways. Theatrical performance then as now offered a fertile and productive space for exploring and playing with identity, a site for exploring the relationship between embodied, intuited, imagined, and assumed realities.

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Notes

1. Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 267–8.
2. Jill Edmonds, 'Princess Hamlet', in Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (eds), *The New Woman and Her Sisters. Feminism and Theatre 1850–1914* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 59–76, pp. 59–60.
3. See, for example, Edmonds, 'Princess Hamlet'; Anne Russell, 'Tragedy, Gender, Performance: Women as Tragic Heroes on the Nineteenth-Century Stage', *Comparative Drama*, 30: 2 (Summer 1996), 135–57; Senelick, *Changing Room*, p. 273; Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 131.
4. Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, 'Acting Between the Spheres: Charlotte Cushman as Androgyne', *Theatre Survey*, 37:2 (November 1996), 23–65, 33.
5. Jacky Bratton, 'Mirroring men: the actress in drag', in Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 235–52, p. 235.
6. Lesley Ferris, 'Introduction: Current Crossings', in Lesley Ferris (ed), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

7. 'The Theatres', *The Satirist*, 3 May 1835, p. 142.
8. For a portrait of Nisbett cross-dressed as Cornet Fitzherbert Fitzhenry in *The Married Rake* see <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw114474/Louisa-Cranstoun-Nisbett-ne-Macnamara-later-Boothby-as-Cornet-Fitzherbert-Fitzhenry-in-The-Married-Rake?search=sp&sText=Louisa+Nisbett&rNo=0>.
9. Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores on Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 120. See also, for example. Bratton, 'Mirroring men', pp. 235–6; Senelick, *Changing Room*, pp. 261–2.
10. *Observer*, 25 February 1838, p. 4.
11. Charles Selby, *The Married Rake* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, ?1835), pp. 15–16. Further references are to this edition.
12. Charles Selby, *The Rifle Brigade* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1838), p. 5, p. 6.
13. In their critique and correction of aristocratic masculinity and desire, these plays can be seen as dramatic equivalents to novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), identified by Nancy Armstrong in her seminal study, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), as paving the way for the ascendancy of middle-class domesticity.
14. William Collier, *Is She a Woman?* (London: J. Duncombe and Co., 1836), p. 6. Further references are to this edition.
15. *Observer*, 3 January 1836, p. 4. Jacky Bratton, by contrast, describes the play as 'openly exploring and eventually tightly resetting the boundaries of acceptably gendered behaviour': Bratton, 'Mirroring Men', p. 240.
16. *The Fine Arts Journal*, 17 April 1847, p. 380.
17. Dion Boucicault, *London Assurance* (London: J. Andrews, 1841), p. 38.
18. Charles Dickens, 'Robert Keeley', *All the Year Round*, 10 April 1869, pp. 438–41, p. 440; 'Haymarket Theatre', *Observer*, 17 October 1847, p. 5.
19. John Peter, 'Also Showing', *Sunday Times*, 14 March 2010, p. 18.
20. See e.g. 'Dramatical and Musical Chit-Chat', *Illustrated London News*, 11 November 1843, p. 315; 'The Theatre Royal: The Proprietor's Benefit', *Manchester Guardian*, 2 June 1847, p. 5; George Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Note-book; with Reminiscences and Chit-chat of the Green-Room and the Stage, in England and America* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1860), p.78.
21. 'Theatricals', *The Age*, 22 June 1844, p. 11.
22. Catherine Gore, *Quid Pro Quo: or, The Day of Dupes* (London: National Acting Drama Office, 1844), p. 82.
23. 'The Theatres', *Illustrated London News*, 22 June 1844, p. 395.
24. 'Theatrical Summary', *The Connoisseur*, Sept 1845, p. 75.
25. Walter Goodman, *The Keeleys on the Stage and at Home* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895), p. 80.
26. 'Theatricals', *Sunday Times*, 25 November 1838, p. 5.
27. Edward Stirling, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Adelphi, 19 November 1938), in Jacky Bratton (ed.), *Dickensian Dramas: Plays from Charles Dickens*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 80.
28. 'Theatricals and Music', *Sunday Times*, 27 October 1839, p. 5. See, for example, Senelick, *Changing Room*, p. 267; George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 140–1. For the fiercest disapproval of women playing Jack Sheppard see S. M. Ellis, 'Jack Sheppard in Literature and Drama', in H. Bleakley and S. M. Ellis, *The Trial of Jack Sheppard* (London & Edinburgh: William

- Hodge & Co., 1933. Great British Trials Series). Whilst forced to acknowledge the critical and commercial success of Mary Keeley's performance, Ellis inveighs against the notion that a middle-aged matron could play the young housebreaker and expresses incomprehension at the relative failure of male actors such as Weedon Grossmith in the role.
29. 'Theatricals and Music', *Sunday Times*, 3 November 1839, p. 5.
 30. For a portrait of Mary Keeley in costume as Jack Sheppard, see <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/portrait-of-mary-anne-keeley-in-the-character-of-jack-sheppard>.
 31. 'Peterborough Theatre', *Theatrical Journal*, July 1840, pp. 256–7, p. 257.
 32. *Spectator*, 2 November 1839, p. 1039.
 33. See, for example, Judith Michelle Williams, *Nineteenth-Century Stage Images of Black Women* (Stanford University, PhD Dissertation, 1997), chapter 3; Hazel Waters, 'Putting "Uncle Tom" on the Victorian Stage', *Institute of Race Relations*, 42:3 (2001), 29–48; Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (University of Georgia Press: Athens & London, 2005), pp. 137–58.
 34. 'Music and the Drama', *Observer*, 5 December 1852, p. 7.
 35. George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review* No. IX (July 1856) (London: John Chapman), p. 54.
 36. George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875), p. 146.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
 38. 'Sketches of London Actors and Actresses', *Daily News*, 4 October 1856, p. 2.
 39. Cecil Pembroke, 'Recognized Favourites', *Theatrical Journal*, July 1854, p. 214.
 40. W. R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall* (London: Stephen Swift & Co., 1912), p. 148.
 41. *Ibid.*
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 43. Lewes, *On Actors*, p. 81.
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 47. 'Dramatic Intelligence', *Musical World*, 16 October 1847, pp. 669–72, p. 670.
 48. 'The Theatres', *The Satirist*, 12 October 1834, p. 324.
 49. *John Bull*, 27 March 1858, p. 204.

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