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## **Theorizing the Woman Performer**

**Helen E. M. Brooks**

The Georgian female performer is a site of contradictions. On the one hand, she is an economically astute, ambitious, talented, and a hard-working professional. On the other, she is an erotic object, sexually ambiguous, and a 'whore'. Since 1661, when the first professional British actress walked onto the stage, these women's off-stage liaisons, sexual availability, and erotic capital have been a constant subject of fascination, providing a tenuous yet consistent basis for popular commentary, biographies, histories and even, more recently, critical studies. Yet while the fascination with the Georgian actresses' sexuality is, to an extent, an inheritance from studies on her Restoration predecessors, it is also the product of our perception of Georgian society. The growth of the bourgeois public sphere and the increasing emphasis on women's domesticity have long been studied as central features of Georgian culture. And within a context in which women are seen as having been relegated to the private sphere, the actress has become a troubling, anomalous figure whose visible publicity was resolved through imagining her as 'whore'.

Underpinning this essay is the supposition that it is time to move away from this focus on sexuality and the image of the 'actress-as-whore', discourses which in their persistence threaten to limit future scholarship both methodologically and in terms of subject matter. While recognizing that sexual identity and questions of representation are important aspects of our wider understanding of Georgian actresses, the subject, as this essay will demonstrate, has been well surveyed. In critically evaluating how sexuality has figured within scholarship on the Georgian actress, and identifying public sphere ideology as largely responsible for its persistence, this essay will examine how alternate theories of the public/private divide might allow us to extricate discussion about actresses from a focus on their sexuality. Not only, it

will argue, would such a move offer new perspectives on the Georgian actress, it would also open up hitherto unexamined areas of these women's lives for scholarly investigation.

Of course, actresses were not the only female performers on the Georgian stage: women also worked as dancers and singers. Indeed, celebrated Georgian actresses like Susannah Cibber (1714-1766) began as singers before advancing to acting. Once she had made this move, and like many actresses, Cibber also sang as part of her dramatic performances, yet as her story demonstrates, singing and dancing in their own right were considered lesser forms of performance within the theatrical hierarchy. And whilst these professions demand vital historical attention, it is on acting, the profession which provided female performers with the most work, the highest salaries, and the greatest public visibility, that this essay will focus.

### **The actress as whore: a problematic discourse**

Far from seeking to reinscribe the focus on actresses' sexuality within scholarship, this essay searches for a framework which will allow us to move away from its restrictive bind. Yet, paradoxically, in order to do this we need first to turn towards sexuality and understand how it has featured in theories of the actress to date. To a great extent the sexual focus of studies on the Georgian actress draws on discourse surrounding the Restoration actress. Yet the association between actresses and sexuality pre-dates the return of Charles II in 1660 and the introduction of real women to the English stage, as evidenced by William Prynne's attack on actresses as 'notorious whores' in *Histrio-Mastix* (1633).<sup>1</sup> Deep-seated anxieties over the connection between female performance and sexual immodesty went as far back as the Greeks. Consequently, when actresses first began appearing on the London stage in 1661 the cultural imagination had already aligned them with the prostitutes who frequented the pit. And once a few actresses began leaving the stage for wealthy, noble lovers, the discursive

association between the two professions seemed to be borne out in practice. Across lampoons, satires, contemporary memoirs recounting numbers of admirers and lovers, sexually playful prologues and epilogues, and most famously Samuel Pepys's accounts of his enjoyment at visiting actresses behind the scenes, Restoration culture continually drew on and played with the association of the actress with sex.

As the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth this relationship between actresses and sex continued to develop. Whilst David Garrick attempted to ban backstage visits, and subsequent critics would later look back upon the period as one of gradual improvement in the 'moral' standard of theatre, the sexuality of actresses would continue to attract attention in the ever-expanding print media. Whether in references to actresses' private lives within memoirs; in commentaries on the allure of their stage performances; in scurrilous publications such as the 1739 trial for criminal conversation (adultery) which described in lurid detail Susannah Cibber's affair with William Sloper; or in sexually-explicit prints such as those satirizing the actress Dorothy Jordan's (1761-1816) relationship with William, Duke of Clarence, sex continued to be a feature of many actresses' public identities.

It is easy to see why early twentieth-century scholars were fascinated by actresses' sex lives. John Harold Wilson's 1958 *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* was certainly not unique in emphasizing actresses' sexual objectification on-stage, in highlighting the role of lovers in providing access to the profession, and in stressing the expectation of their sexual availability off-stage.<sup>ii</sup> Yet while studies like Wilson's drew directly on historic sources as evidence of these 'facts', in the 1970s, at the height of second-wave feminism, scholars began to use those same sources for a different purpose: to critically analyze the sexual image of the historic actress. In 1979 Katharine Eisaman Maus was the first scholar to theorize, rather than just describe, the relationship between sex and the actress. Informed by recent feminist historiography, which had identified the Restoration and eighteenth-century

as a period of declining opportunities for women's work, Maus sought to explain the actress's resistance to this trend, concluding that she:

is in a practically unique position, since her claim to public notice and professional competence is based upon an inherited association of role-playing with female sexuality [...] the kind of attention she can command is determined by these ideological constraints.<sup>iii</sup>

Unlike previous scholarship which had considered sex simply as an aspect, or even a by-product, of a woman's status as an actress, for Maus it was central to an actress's identity, professional status, and success. This argument was to have a long-lasting impact not only on studies of the Restoration actress, but also on those of her eighteenth-century successors.

For Maus the actress's association with sexuality was based both on an historic association of female performance and sex, and on the reality of actresses' promiscuity, as evidenced through a range of contemporary sources. By the early 1990s, however, scholars had begun to argue that such sources might be evidence, not of actual sexual practices, but rather of cultural attitudes towards actresses. This shift in thinking was informed by two trends: first, by the turn away from recovery in women's history and towards analyses of discourses of femininity; and secondly, by the growth of poststructuralism, which sought to understand the shifting construction of meaning at particular historical moments. Drawing on these new methodological approaches scholars began to analyze the language, discourse, and representation of actresses' sexuality in order to understand how it related, in particular, to gender identity and power. Revisiting sexually-inflected memoirs, tracts, poems, portraits, prints, and play-texts as evidence of cultural attitudes rather than material experiences, scholars debated the function of sexual representations of actresses. Some, like Ellen Donkin,

concluded that these images ‘had little to do with her private conduct offstage and everything to do with the projected desires of the viewing audience’, while others took a different approach, arguing that these sexually-inflected attacks were a response to actresses’ achievement of social mobility, influence, economic wealth, and professional achievement.<sup>iv</sup> As social historians have highlighted, attacking an individual’s sexual reputation was a common means of threatening economic rivals, while pornographic attacks were often the consequence of women’s threat to social structures.<sup>v</sup> Within this context, as scholars including Kristina Straub and Cheryl Wanko have argued, representations of actresses as sexually promiscuous functioned to distract attention from their status, to deny them power, and to negate their threat.<sup>vi</sup> Others have taken a more positive stance. Suggesting that actresses’ sexuality gave them power over the public imagination, Kirsten Pullen and Kimberly Crouch have argued that some actresses were agents in their sexual image and actively presented themselves within the whore discourse in order to gain independence and appeal to audiences.<sup>vii</sup> Laura Rosenthal, in a similarly positive approach, sees the association of actresses and prostitutes as the consequence not of morality or prurience but of their parallel positions as central figures within an emerging celebrity culture.<sup>viii</sup>

While a number of scholars have challenged the idea that actresses were passive erotic objects and victims of male desire, more recently there has been an attempt to move away from this discourse altogether. Felicity Nussbaum’s *Rival Queens* explicitly eschews a focus on actresses’ sexuality, arguing that there are more productive frames of reference than the ‘proper lady/prostitute’ opposition imposed upon women players.<sup>ix</sup> Yet while scholars are making concerted attempts to direct attention to other areas of actresses’ lives, extricating discussion of their public identity and professional success from that of their sexuality has been hard to achieve. Certainly, direct references to actresses’ sexual proclivities now appear dated, but discussions around the erotic capital of women’s performances, and references to

actresses' virtue or unconventional lifestyles continue to infiltrate even the most revisionist scholarship. In part, justification for the continuing relevance of such references to sexuality can be found in the apparent focus on sex in the Georgian period itself, whether in memoirs, tracts, poems, popular prints, or high-art portraits. Yet, as Deborah C. Payne points out, in an argument made of Restoration scholarship but equally applicable to the Georgian period, the disproportionate scholarly attention given to sexual representations has led to an overestimation of their prevalence, while at the same time presenting them as exemplars of dominant cultural attitudes, rather than the products of authors who were often defending embattled positions in the marketplace.<sup>x</sup> Far more significant in the continuing influence of the 'whore' discourse on Georgian theatre scholarship is the dominance of the ideology of the public/private.

### **Georgian women and the public sphere**

Since 1989, when German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas's 1962 study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* first appeared in English, the division of the public and private spheres has been a central feature of Georgian social history. Habermas identified the period as one which saw the growth of a bourgeois public sphere, embodied in spaces such as theatres, coffee houses, and newspaper clubs where individuals came together to engage in rational debate and negotiate consensus over issues of common concern. For Habermas a central feature of the public sphere was that it aimed to be accessible to all. However, second-wave feminist historians who were concurrently identifying the separation of men and women into public and private spheres as being a central feature of historic women's lives, argued that the public sphere was a fundamentally masculinist realm which enforced the relegation of women into the private, domestic sphere.<sup>xi</sup> In a context in which

the liberation of women from sexual repression was a politically dominant agenda and in which modern women's position came to be seen as the consequence of a long history of oppression within a patriarchal society, the public/private divide quickly became a master narrative for women's history, with feminist scholars hotly debating whether the private sphere was one of oppression and restriction or a distinctly female realm of possibility and agency. The result was that by the end of twentieth-century, as Joan Landes reflected in 2003, other than gender, there was 'perhaps no more widely employed concept in feminist historiography than that of the public and private'.<sup>xii</sup>

Within studies on the actress the public/private debate has been a central justification for the focus on sexuality and the continuing prevalence of the 'whore' discourse. As workers labouring in an archetypal public space and as subjects of intense interest for the growing media—the apparatus of the public sphere—actresses, scholars argue, were explicitly public women in a society which demanded women be confined in private. And while privacy signified chastity and purity, publicity had a long association with prostitution and promiscuity. As the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau declared in 1757, 'there are no good morals for women outside of a withdrawn and domestic life [...] any woman who shows herself off disgraces herself.'<sup>xiii</sup> As the most overt of public women, the female performer was the subject of particular concern since, Rousseau thought, it was extremely unlikely 'that she who sets herself for sale in performance would not soon do the same in person and never let herself be tempted to satisfy desires that she takes so much effort to excite.'<sup>xiv</sup> Drawing on this relationship between a woman's publicity and her sexuality, public/private discourse places particular weight on the importance of sexuality in general, and the whore discourse more specifically, within studies on the actress. As Kristina Straub argued in her seminal 1992 study *Sexual Suspects*, the actress was starkly at odds with expectations of her wider sex and 'the site of an excessive sexuality that must be—but never



fully is—contained or repressed'.<sup>xv</sup> Although, as she argues, attempts were made throughout the century to recuperate and contain this public femininity within the dominant ideology of domesticity they were never wholly successful and 'the whore' was always 'close at hand to the mother, wife or daughter image'.<sup>xvi</sup> That is, at least until the arrival of the first 'respectable' actress: Sarah Siddons.

From her debut at Drury Lane in 1782 to her retirement in 1812, Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) was a national icon, hailed as the living embodiment of the tragic muse, Melponeme, and renowned for moving whole audiences to tears with her powerful portrayals of tragic mothers, widows, and daughters. On a professional level, through regular seasons at Drury Lane and incessant touring across the country, Siddons earned more than any previous performer, male or female, as well as cultivating a distinctive style of performance which would be remembered for generations to come: not least through her landmark portrayal of Lady Macbeth. Yet while Siddons has rightly been recognized for these accomplishments, she has also been credited with the more debatable achievement of becoming the first actress to overshadow the 'shame' traditionally associated with her profession.<sup>xvii</sup> As early as 1814, only two years after her retirement, the *Theatrical Inquisitor* praised her for having:

first shewed [sic] the possibility of at once standing high in theatrical excellence, and retaining those purer distinctions, without which the glory of woman's talent 'lights only to her shame'. From that moment the Stage rose in purity [...] From the period that honourable women found a reception, dramatic habits grew more deserving of public approval, and the Theatre refined from a place of fearful exposure, into a refuge for that genius and loveliness<sup>xviii</sup>

This image of Siddons as the first actress to achieve professional success without sacrificing her chastity continues, with little variation, to the present day. Across Georgian accounts Siddons is frequently portrayed as having purified the image of the actress and, as Judith Pascoe has put it, provided a role model for other women who might have wanted to ‘enter the public sphere without damaging their personal reputations in the process’.<sup>xix</sup> Although other factors—including theatrical publications, commemorative biographies, and high art portraiture—also played their part in ‘improving’ the reputation of actresses, Siddons, with her carefully crafted public persona of respectability, remains widely accepted as the first actress to break free from the profession’s historic association with the whore.

While Siddons’s contribution to theatre history is certainly an important one, this particular portrayal of her is problematic. Based on a Whiggish model of historical progression, and saturated with value judgments inherited from a late eighteenth-century ideal of bourgeois femininity, the narrative of the Georgian actress’s transformation into a virtuous, moral, chaste figure with the arrival of Siddons is a direct product of the influence of public sphere ideology. At the same point as it elevates Siddons, this ideology elides the achievements and contributions of earlier actresses on the basis of their apparently troubling sexuality. As anomalous figures, these women are placed, at best, only on the periphery of mainstream female experience: they are dismissed as problematic figures whom society sought to contain and who therefore have little to contribute to wider understandings of women’s experience in the Georgian period. Not only, therefore, has a focus on sexuality distorted the history of the actress, but, equally troublingly, it has severed the actress from her place within wider studies on women’s history in the period.

There remain, as a consequence, important areas of actresses’ lives that demand attention for their significance both within theatre, and within women’s history. The actress Dorothy Jordan, for instance, although largely unexamined in anything other than sexual

terms, is an excellent example of the wealth of material made available if we move beyond the sexual framework.<sup>xx</sup> Jordan was a celebrated figure on the late eighteenth-century stage. Reigning supreme as the comic muse of the London stage at the turn of the century, Jordan rivalled Siddons both for public acclaim and wages. There are in fact many points of comparison between the two women: both toured extensively, both sought the highest salary, and both cultivated styles of performance and public personae which firmly enshrined them within the public imagination. Yet, unlike Siddons, Jordan's hard work and phenomenal success has been largely overlooked: side-lined by her apparently far more fascinating private life as the long-term partner of William, Duke of Clarence (later William IV), and mother to thirteen children by three different men. Jordan's failure to fit into contemporary bourgeois ideals of domesticity as well as our own modern notions of conventional marital relations in the Georgian period, has—along with a number satirical and sexually-suggestive caricatures by Isaac Cruikshank and James Gillray in which Jordan was used to attack the Duke of Clarence—led to a focus on her sexuality at the expense of the other, far more interesting aspects of her life and work.

In particular, the extensive letters Jordan wrote to her partner and children between 1790 and 1814 provide a wealth of historical insight into the working pattern of touring actors; audience reactions to plays; negotiations over contracts and money; the balancing of home and theatrical responsibilities; and the general domestic concerns of Georgian life. Throughout her letters Jordan's commentaries on the theatre overlap with concerns over the family budget, discussion of her family's health, plans for home improvements, travel plans, and the sending of supplies to her son George who was enlisted in the navy in 1808 (including 'portable soup' and 'a pair of curtains ready made up...[which] will fit any window and may be put up in 10 minutes').<sup>xxi</sup> As such her letters provide a fascinating picture not only of the theatre but of Georgian life at the turn of the century. Whilst Jordan's

status as a 'mistress' (although I would argue that this is a misleading name for her twenty-one year relationship with Clarence) has led to a focus on her ambiguous sexuality and the question of whether she was or was not a whore, in fact her letters reveal her to be little different to the model bourgeois mother and 'wife'.<sup>xxii</sup> Looking at the evidence of Jordan's life without first containing her within public/private discourses, offers new insights not only into the theatre of the time, but into women's roles, concerns, and interactions with those around them. Similarly a focus on the practice of everyday life (as evidenced in her letters), as opposed to the discourse of social ideology, provides a new way of thinking about actresses' relationships to the public and private spheres.

Actresses like Jordan are not unique in revealing a split between ideological discourse and their everyday practices. Brian Cowan has suggested that although the gendered division of public and private was increasingly dominant towards the end of the century as one aspect of society's knowledge and perception of itself, this 'normative public sphere' was not necessarily reflective of the 'practical public sphere' of people's material practices.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is an argument which builds on twenty years of research demonstrating the widespread participation of women in the public sphere. From Harriet Guest's work on women's participation in salons; to Susan Staves's and Amy Erickson's studies on female property ownership; Peter Earle's and Margaret Hunt's examinations of women and work; and Betty Schellenber's studies of women's self-publishing, scholars have proven—as Amanda Vickery first argued in 1993—that the female public world was both larger and less menacing than often allowed.<sup>xxiv</sup> Whilst women might not commonly have had institutional freedom, as Vickery has pointed out, they certainly had access to public places, entertainments, and opinions, and were visibly public—whether in their philanthropic activities or through the constant female presence at pleasure gardens, seaside resorts, spa towns, museums,

assemblies, and theatres.<sup>xxv</sup> Even though there were ideological inhibitions to women's publicity, in practice women played a prominent role in the public sphere. As such, Linda Colley has argued, the renewed emphasis on separate spheres in the late Georgian period may actually have been a defensive response to an increase in women's participation in public life rather than a reflection of their decreasing involvement.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Rethinking the public/private binary**

Within this new scholarly context in which women's public activity in the Georgian period is widely recognized, the idea that actresses were anomalies who were considered sexually dubious simply because of their presence in the public sphere becomes questionable. Certainly contemporaries did not always perceive actresses in this way. In fact, as Stephen Howard has argued, newspapers and periodicals became increasingly appreciative of the female contribution to the public sphere over the course of the century, praising, rather than attacking public women, including female performers, for the part they played within wider society. As a whole therefore, and as Lawrence E. Klein has warned, we have to be very wary of 'the tendency to overestimate or rely uncritically on the binary opposition either as a feature of people's mental equipment in the past or as an analytic device for those of us who write histories': not least because while the terms are often used in the Georgian period, their meanings are multiple, with no one, clear, definition of the public/private distinction.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Recognizing, as Jane Rendall has argued, that 'a single version of the public sphere is insufficient to allow us to understand the complicated variety of ways in which women might identify with communities which stretched far beyond the borders [...] of home and family', scholars have therefore increasingly sought to find alternative ways of imagining the public

sphere which allow both for the gendered discourse evident in prescriptive literature, and for the widespread publicity of women.<sup>xxviii</sup> One theory which has been highly influential in this context is Nancy Fraser's notion of subaltern counter-publics. Fraser has argued, in direct opposition to Habermas, that the bourgeois public sphere was never the only public but that there were also a significant number of alternative public spheres, constructed around diverse identities, such as those of elite women, peasants, the working classes, and different nationalities.<sup>xxix</sup> These counter public spheres, Fraser argues, developed as a result of such groups' exclusion from, and opposition to, the dominant public spheres, and were both spaces of withdrawal from and agitation against dominant publics.<sup>xxx</sup> It is an argument which Michael Warner has developed, arguing that the counter-publics are conscious of their subordinate status and actively mark themselves off from the dominant publics through the cultivation of idioms, styles, and discourses which would meet with hostility or be regarded as indecorousness in other contexts.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Theories of counter-publics provide a useful framework for analyzing Georgian actresses, allowing as they do both for the image of the actress-as-whore, as viewed from the dominant bourgeois public, and for an alternative reading of her image when considered in relation to a counter-public. Charlotte Charke (1713-1760) is a perfect example. In her *Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke* (1755), the first autobiography written by an actress, Charke details a life in which, alongside work as a strolling actress, she tried her hand at a host of male trades, including being a groom, a butler, and a publican; wrote four novels; and cross-dressed both on and off stage, living as Mr Charles Brown for almost ten years. From the viewpoint of the dominant public Charke certainly, as Philip E. Baruth has noted, 'made a life's work of transgressing dramatic, social, and sexual boundaries'.<sup>xxxii</sup> Yet from another perspective her behaviour embodied what Terry Castle has described as the 'culture

of travesty': a counter-public of masquerade, gender-play, and female-to-male cross-dressing which existed through until the later decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Charke's mutable identity was not so unusual within a context in which women passed as men both occasionally (particularly to travel, elope, or riot) and over long periods: Hannah Snell aka James Gray (1723-1793) spent two years serving in the army before being granted a royal pension for her service, while the Chevalier D'Eon (1728-1810) was commonly, although we now know falsely, understood to be a woman living as a man,. As Kirsten Pullen therefore notes, whilst from the one perspective Charke was figured, and figured herself, as 'whore', from another she 'suggested an alternative model of female behaviour that was widely read and circulated'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rather than socially anomalous figures who failed to conform to the dominant model of private bourgeois femininity, actresses like Charke, when considered as participants in a counter-public, become provocative figures who challenged dominant models of female identity, and gestured, as Kristina Straub has argued, towards possible sites of resistance to sexual ideology.<sup>xxxv</sup> As Felicity Nussbaum has recently argued, 'actresses were not simply exceptions who proved the rule of domestic retreat: they were constitutive of alternatives to conventional femininity in the public sphere.'<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Of course this approach does not challenge or negate the image of the actress as sexually suspect. It simply offers an alternative perspective on actresses' relationships with the dominant bourgeois public sphere: a relationship in which they are both in conflict and subordinate. Within this framework the actress remain anomalous.

There are however other approaches to public spheres. Michael Warner, for example, has argued that as well as counterpublics there are also sub- or specialized publics where participants often also consider themselves members of, or even representative of, the general public.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Geoff Eley has similarly argued for a multiplicity of non-bourgeois publics,

suggesting that instead of thinking of the public sphere as a place we need to think it as a conceptual arena or ‘structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place’.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Unlike counterpublics, which are always in conflict with, and subordinate to, dominant publics, these alternate publics exist alongside, within, and at times in conflict with, the bourgeois public.

Such approaches offer significant potential for analyses of the actress. With recognition of these multiple, constantly interacting public discourses the notion that the profession of actress offered, in Elizabeth Eger’s words, ‘a realm of possibility and independent action for women concerned to push against the social and political boundaries marked out for their sex’ is brought into question and the actress can be placed in a more nuanced relationship with gender roles.<sup>xxxix</sup> This framework therefore opens up the potential for individual actresses to be recognized not simply for pushing against the norm, but for their engagements with, resistances to, promotions of, negotiations with, and constructions of varying models of feminine identity. Rather than constituting exceptions to the rule or alternatives to a dominant, conventional femininity, actresses within this model represent the plurality of female publicity available to contemporary women and at specific moments across the period.

Within a context in which there are multiple models of public and private spheres, all in dialogue with each other, and each with a distinctive relationship to gender, the very utility of the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ comes into question. As Kerber has argued, ‘to continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships.’<sup>xl</sup> Brian Cowan concurs. Stating that the notion of public spheres is entirely defunct, he argues instead that there were diverse, interlocking spheres of male and female activity whose level of openness or privateness was informed by their relationship to either the state or commercialized leisure and by factors



including class, political affiliation, regional identity, ethnicity, and sex.<sup>xli</sup> It is Susan Gal, however, who has taken the most distinctive approach to the problem embodied by the public/private binary. Rather than rejecting the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’, Gal proposes an entirely new, semiotic, approach to their relationship. Part of the reason for the continuing prevalence of the public/private binary in history, Gal argues, is that in getting caught up in discussions of the unstable boundaries between these spheres scholars implicitly assume the existence of a single dichotomy where these boundaries meet, and so collapse a complex interaction between multiple spheres of activity into simple binary split. Such thinking is certainly evident in studies on the actress, who have frequently been held up as participants in shifting the boundaries between public and private. Instead of looking at public and private in binary terms, Gal argues, we should consider them in fractal terms. Proposing that the public/private split can be applied to any context and reproduced repeatedly by broadening or narrowing that context, she uses the example of a domestic environment: with a recursive pattern ‘down’ towards increasing privacy, the street/house divides into public/private, then the house fractures into public and private areas such as living room/bedroom, while the bedroom breaks down in the same way into doorway/bed, and so on.<sup>xlii</sup> Within this approach the labels public and private and the relationship of these two terms to each other remains the same while the spaces they refer to change each time they are used. Public and private here are not spheres, domains, or places, but rather tools for categorizing, organizing and contrasting aspects of society. Moving away from considering public and private as realms which the actress was contained within or which she resisted, and figuring them instead as methodological tools, is certainly an exciting way forward: it frees us from the limiting discourse of the actress as whore, and the focus on actresses’ sexuality, but also opens up new possibilities for theorizing the actress.

Applying Gal's model to the theatre reveals nuances rarely considered when we talk about actresses as 'public women'. Breaking down the theatre into public and private—street/theatre, foyer/auditorium, pit/stage, front-stage/backstage, corridors/dressing room—forces us to rethink the notion of the actress's profession as 'public'. Similarly, Dorothy Jordan's letters offer, in light of Gal's model, a new perspective on the intersection public and private. Take, for instance, a letter of September 1802. Here 'private' comments about her children ('Do the dear children ever mention me?') stand in contrast with 'public' ones on the theatre ('the house here was fuller than it ever was before'); interestingly, however, Jordan's apparent preference is for the private: she declines the 'great honor' of dinner at Lady Wittingham's 'since I go out early with poor Floyd and my sister and walk by the sea, and I find this sufficient amusement'.<sup>xliii</sup> Using this new, more mobile model of the public/private distinction as an interpretative tool adds new dimensions to our understanding of the Georgian actress.

### **The actress's challenge to theatre history**

Making use of these new approaches to the public/private relationship offers a means of moving away from a sexual framework and thereby of relocating the actress to a central position within theatre history. With generations of historians depicting a theatre dominated by key male figures such as Thomas Betterton, John Rich, David Garrick, and Richard Sheridan, actresses have been, at best, incorporated into a male narrative of theatrical development. Never, therefore, have we had a Theatre in the Age of Siddons to rival the many surveys which privilege Garrick as a figure of epochal definition; nor have we had a study on the stage from Anne Oldfield to Dorothy Jordan, although we have had studies on the theatre from Betterton to Kean. Despite the fact that, for contemporaries, actresses were often seen

within a distinctive tradition of female performance, were valued in reviews in equal measure, and could be paid higher rates than their male peers, the role they played in the theatre has until recently been largely overlooked. Following in the wake of feminist scholars such as Joan Kelly, who thirty years ago declared that ‘one of the tasks of women’s history is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization’, which she argued privileged male experience, and Susan Bennett, who more recently called for a ‘decomposing history’ which included an overhaul of existing periodizations, Nussbaum therefore offers a new period: the age of the actress.<sup>xliv</sup>

Whether the title ‘age of the actress’ is used directly or not however, a renewed focus on the centrality of the actress to theatre history, and a concurrent move away from the focus on sexuality, is already seeing exciting new developments in the field. Scholars are re-examining the particular ways in which social changes and events impacted on the female performer, as well as the ways in which her history might be marked by turning points distinct to and different from that of the male narrative. Current work on pregnancy and maternity, for example, is shedding new light on the ways in which this uniquely female experience effected the actress, both in terms of practicalities—for instance, the impact of heavy pregnancy, antenatal ‘confinement’, and post-natal ‘lying in’ on performance and working patterns—and within the context of the increasing cultural attention paid to these roles from the middle of the century onwards. Another focus concerns the way in which legislation preventing married women from owning property or signing their own contracts shaped actresses’ professional lives and choices. For Susannah Cibber, a six-month campaign to persuade David Garrick to join her in purchasing the Drury Lane patent between 1745 and 1747 resulted in failure precisely because Garrick was concerned that ‘her husband will interfere, or somebody must act for her’.<sup>xlv</sup> And although the strolling and fairground circuits were free of such limitations and provide plenty of examples of women in management, the

opportunity for progressing to mainstream management that they offered male managers were closed to women.<sup>xlvi</sup> Marital law shaped every aspect of an actress's professional life, from signing her contract, to collecting her wage and negotiating her roles. But it was not all negative. By marrying 'into and up' the profession an actress could take advantage of her husband's status to advance her own career: a strategy used by Susannah Cibber to great effect in the early years of her career.<sup>xlvii</sup>

For the Georgian actress the relationship between the personal and professional was often complex. And there are many areas still waiting to be examined. What was the impact of the licensing act on female strolling managers who were unable to move into legitimate theatre? How did the growth of the theatrical circuit affect women as opposed to men? Did ageing impact distinctly on actresses' careers, as it often does today? How did women negotiate the demands of childcare and work? These questions and more remain ripe areas for analysis with their answers offering a fuller understanding of the women's experience of working in the Georgian theatre.

The value of asking these new questions is not solely in the writing of a new 'herstory' of the actress but also in the new perspectives they offer on the wider theatrical culture in which, from 1660, female performers played a central role. Rather than constructing an alternative female history, scholars are looking to integrate this gynocentric focus with the larger, often pre-existing and largely male-dominated narrative: recognizing in Joan Kelly's words that a 'woman's place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally' and showing how the female experience was part of, and shaped, theatrical culture.<sup>xlviii</sup> In doing so, however, they are not dissipating women's agency, or, as Purvis and Wetherall have warned, suggesting women are 'historically viable subjects only when placed alongside men'.<sup>xlix</sup> Rather such scholars seek to change our understanding of the mainstream through highlighting the importance of women's part within

it. An analysis of shifting understandings of the skill of performance in relation to understandings of women's bodies, minds, and social roles, for example, doesn't simply enable a history of female performance to be told but rather, with men and women performing together, challenges understandings of performance as a whole. Examining women's experiences of their profession—as distinct from those of their male peers—as a result of their socially and biologically gendered roles, but never simply as parallel or mutually exclusive, will ensure that our continuing recovery is not only of the actress but also of theatre of the period—a theatre comprised of both men and women.

In the last forty years research on the Georgian actress has seen fascinating advances. Recent studies have offered insights into the way in which these women managed their careers; on the important role they played in the construction of celebrity culture, ideas of personhood, and national identity; and on the influence they had in shaping public perceptions of the theatre. The Georgian stage, as scholars frequently assert, was a place of great opportunity for women: whether this meant making a living, or making their fortune; whether it meant playing roles or becoming role models. Yet while increasing recognition is now given to these historic actresses' economic, professional, and artistic agency, future developments in the field are at risk of being stifled by the tenacity of the erotic and sexual as thematic frameworks. Buttressed by an understanding of actresses' anomalous status in a world where women were excluded from the public sphere, the discourse of the 'actress-as-whore' has maintained a steady, if not always explicit, hold on the field. Looking towards the work of social philosophers and historians, however, future scholarship has the potential to break away from this well-rehearsed discourse. Rather than possessing a single set of ideas about female (or indeed male) social roles, Georgian attitudes were diverse and multifaceted, and reflected women's public visibility whether as workers, philanthropists, consumers, or at leisure. As a result, the dichotomization of Georgian society into the dualisms of

male/female, public/private, and work/family has come increasingly under fire, destabilizing the grounds on which the discourse of the 'actress-as-whore' has rested and opening up exciting new opportunities for wider and more ambitious analyses. Ultimately, however, it will only be through a concerted effort to reimagine the history of the actress that we will begin to recognize these women's status as influential figures both within the history of theatre, and within the history of Georgian women. Perhaps then we will finally see the actress taking a place not only in studies on theatre, but on historic women more broadly.

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<sup>i</sup> William Prynne, *Histriomastix: The Player's Scourge, or Actor's Tragedy* (London: Edward Allde et al., 1633), 203.

<sup>ii</sup> John Harold Wilson, *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 17, 20, 26, 51, 85.

<sup>iii</sup> Katharine Eisaman Maus, 'Playhouse Flesh and Blood: Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress', *ELH*, 46 (1979), 614.

<sup>iv</sup> Ellen Donkin, 'Mrs Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth Century British Theatre', in Janelle G. Reinelt, & Joseph R. Roach (eds.), *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 277.

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<sup>vi</sup> Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 75; Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), especially 90-93, 98.

<sup>vii</sup> Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 23, 79-92; Kimberly Crouch, 'The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?' in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations, and Responsibilities* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 58-59, 65-67; For this argument in relation to Mary Robinson see Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 62.

<sup>viii</sup> Laura J. Rosenthal, 'Entertaining Women: The Actress in Eighteenth-Century Theatre and Culture', in Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 160-161.

<sup>ix</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>x</sup> Deborah C. Payne, 'Reified Object or Emergent Professional? Retheorizing the Restoration Actress', in J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah Payne Fisk (eds.), *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 20-23.

<sup>xi</sup> See for example Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988)

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- xiv Ibid.
- xv Straub, *Sexual Suspects*, 89.
- xvi Ibid., 93
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- xxvi Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 281.
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