Eighteenth-Century Performance Practices:
The Early Actress

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Course Summary:
The introduction of actresses to the restored stage in 1660 created new roles for women, from the *femmes forts* of she-tragedy to the ‘gay romps’ of Restoration sex comedies. Stage business from comedic cross-dressing to comic (and tragic) bed-tricks ensured that actresses were centre stage and women’s plots the main attraction. These new roles were also vehicles for managing and promoting the celebrity of star actresses from Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons, who became adept at using their on-stage characters to promote their off-stage celebrity personae, while their celebrity personae inflected and informed interpretation of the roles they played. This course will focus on the power of celebrity actresses to make meaning both on-stage and off. We will use both celebrity studies and eighteenth-century acting techniques to perform celebrity personae and create ‘star turns.’

Learning Outcomes:
Students successfully completing this course will gain:

- Understanding of the variety of ways – historical, social, ideological – in which theatre and performance engage with, and are shaped by, the culture around them.
- Specific knowledge of: social and cultural conditions of eighteenth-century theatre, celebrity theory, and the interplay of celebrity persona, dramatic character, and audience reception.
- Critical and historical understanding of the significance of female performers in the development of drama, theatre and celebrity culture.
- Skills in research, especially gathering, evaluating, sifting and summarising appropriate evidence and ideas.
- Skills in applying and articulating critical and historical understanding to embodied work.

Assessment

**Practical Essay (80%)**: A 5-7 minute per person performance of a scene or pastiche of scenes demonstrating knowledge of and advancing an argument about the interplay between an eighteenth-century actress’s celebrity persona and dramatic role(s). Groups of 2-3 preferred.

**Critical Portfolio (20%)**: 2,000-2,500 word reflective analysis of the practical essay to include a biographical entry on the celebrity actress that demonstrates knowledge of her significance to theatre history, her celebrity persona, and its relation to her biography.

Course Outline:

*Week 1: Welcome Week (no class)*

**Research Topics:**
- Restoration and Eighteenth-century theatre and drama
- The rise of the actress
Recommended Reading:

Week 2: Overview and Introduction

Research and Discussion Topics:
- What is celebrity?
- Gender roles
- Eighteenth-century theatrical conventions

Lecture: Celebrity persona, the rise of the actress, and public intimacy
Workshop: Eighteenth-Century Conventions: courtesies, carriage (‘the line of beauty’) and couplings

Required Reading:

Recommended for further study:

Week 3: Celebrity Pictures, Passions and Postures

Research and Discussion Topics:
- Portraiture v Caricature
- Dramatic Paintings
- Postures and Attitudes

Lecture: Image-making and ‘branding’
Workshop: Passions and Tableaux Vivant

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:


See also: [http://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/emma-hamilton-seduction-and-celebrity](http://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/emma-hamilton-seduction-and-celebrity)

**Week 4: Celebrity Personae on & off stage**

**Research and Discussion Topics:**
- Biographies, Memoirs and Autobiographies: who is telling the story?
- The media, the celebrity and the fan
- Metatheatre and paratexts
- Audience responses: Letters, Diaries and Gossip

**Mini lectures:** each group to present on making and marketing celebrity personae *(formative assessment: oral feedback by tutor and peers)*

**Workshop:** Prologues/epilogues: linking the actor and character

**Required Reading**

A. *Charlotte Charke, A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (1755) OR *Mary Robinson, Memoirs of Mary Robinson* (1801).

B. *James Boaden, The Life of Mrs. Jordan; including Original Private Correspondence, and Numerous Anecdotes of her Contemporaries* (1831) OR Anon. *The Tryal of Two Causes, between Theophilus Cibber, gent. Plaintiff, and William Sloper, Esq; defendant...* (1740)

C. SEARCH Pepy’s Diary ([http://www.pepysdiary.com/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/)) for references to ‘Nell[y]’ or ‘Gwyn[ne]’ OR SEARCH The Horace Walpole Correspondence ([http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/](http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/)) for references to and correspondence with Frances Abington. What other contemporary references can you find?

D. Anon. *Authentick Memoirs of the Life of that celebrated actress Mrs. Ann Oldfield* (1730) OR *A Poem to the Memory of the Celebrated Mrs. Cibber* (1766)


**Recommended Reading:**

Cibber, Colley. *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (1740).
Week 5: Comedy Queens
Research and Discussion Topics
- Female plots
- Audience engagement
- Verisimilitude

Mini Lecture: Comic Conventions
Workshops: Solo: Why is Lady Easy uneasy? (I.i)
Group: Embodied Passions (from Act III)
Required Reading: Colley Cibber, The Careless Husband (1704)
Recommended Reading:

Week 6: Tragedy Queens
Research and Discussion Topics:
- Patent theatres and repertory
- The significance of ‘she-tragedy’
- The spectacle of suffering

Mini Lecture: Tragic Conventions
Workshop: Rival Zaras
Round 1: William Congreve, The Mourning Bride (1697) (Anne Bracegirdle and Elizabeth Barry)
Round 2: Aaron Hill, Zara (1734) (Susannah Cibber)
Round 3: William Congreve, Zara (1783) (Sarah Siddons)
I asked him how the part of Almeria, who ought indeed be the heroine of the tragedy, had affected him? His answer was, ‘I recollect nothing about the acting of Almeria; for the disdain and indignation of the Siddons, in Zara, engrossed all attention, and swept away the possibility of interest in anything else…’ (Life of Mrs Siddons, 190)

Required Reading:
William Congreve, The Mourning Bride (1697)
Aaron Hill, Zara (1734)

Recommended Reading:


**Week 7: Reading Week (no class)**

Practice:
- Making your emotional state legible ('the passions')
- ‘Scoring’ a scene to identify and draw out emotional states.
- Interpreting a character through a celebrity persona

**Week 8: Breeches roles**

**Research and Discussion Topics:**
- Crossdressing v crossgendered casting
- Gender roles: sex, decency and politeness

**Workshop:** gender-bending performances
Round 1: Susannah Mountfort and Anne Bracegirdle in *Sir Anthony Love* (1690) [cross-dressing]
Round 2: Peg Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair (1740s) [cross-gendered casting]

**Required Reading:**
George Farquhar, *The Constant Couple* (1700)
Thomas Southerne, *Sir Anthony Love* (1690)

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 9: Bed Tricks and Death Scenes**

**Research and Discussion Topics:**
- ‘to die’ onstage: sex and death as moments of titillation
- sex and violence

**Workshop:** seducing the audience
Round 1: Calista’s Tomb
Round 2: Berinthia’s bedroom

**Required Reading:**
Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent* (1703)
John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse* (1697)

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 10: Practical Essays – In Class Rehearsal**
Formative Assessment: Each group must present a 90-second ‘elevator pitch’ on their chosen actress(es) and text(s). What will the practical essay show? Oral feedback by tutor and peers.

**Week 11: Practical Essays – Draft Performances**
Formative Assessment: oral feedback by tutor and peers on practical essay

**Week 12: Practical Essays – In-Class Assessment (80%)**

**Week 13: Critical Portfolio – Submit via Turnitin (20%)**

**Selected Bibliography**

**Primary Texts**

**Acting Theory**
Foote, Samuel. *A Treatise on the Passions so far as they regard the Stage etc.* London, 1747.

**Theatrical Memoir/(Autobiography)**
*The Biography of the British Stage: being correct narratives of the lives of all the principal actors and actresses … to which is added a comic poem, entitled, ‘The Actress’*. London, 1824.
Curlin, Edmund. ‘compiler’ *The History of the English Stage, from the Restoration to the Present Time; including the Lives, Characters, and Amours of the most eminent Actors and Actresses, Dead and Living…* London, 1741. rev. & rpt. 1814.
The Thespian Dictionary; or Dramatic biography of the present age. London, 1802. 2nd edition ‘with considerable improvements’ 1805.

Pearce, Charles. ‘Polly Peachum’: being the story of Lavina Fenton (Duchess of Bolton) and ‘The Beggar’s Opera’. London, 1913.


Dramatic Literature
Cibber, Colley. The Careless Husband (1704)
Congreve, William. The Mourning Bride (1697)
Farquhar, George. The Constant Couple (1700)
Hill, Aaron. Zara (1734)
Southerne, Thomas. Sir Anthony Love (1690)
Rowe, Nicholas. The Fair Penitent (1703)
Vanbrugh, John. The Relapse (1697)

Secondary Texts


Gruber, Elizabeth. "Betray’d to Shame": Venice Preserv’d and the Paradox of She-Tragedy.


King, Thomas A. "’As if (she) were made on purpose to put the whole world into good Humour’: Reconstructing the First English Actresses’. TDR 36.3 (1992): 78-102.


---. ‘Rethinking Reform Comedies: Colley Cibber’s Desiring Women.’ Eighteenth Century Studies, 46.3 (2013): 385-97


