Illuminating the Eighteenth-Century British Stage: Perfecting Performance through Education

Bethany Csomay

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ILLUMINATING THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH STAGE: PERFECTING PERFORMANCE THROUGH EDUCATION

A Thesis
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

By
Bethany Jean Csomay

May 2018
ILLUMINATING THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH STAGE: PERFECTING PERFORMANCE THROUGH EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

ILLUMINATING THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH STAGE: PERFECTING PERFORMANCE THROUGH EDUCATION

By

Bethany Csomay

May 2018

Thesis supervised by Laura Engel

Actress studies has become “a truly interdisciplinary field” that “intersect[s] with art, music, literature, history, economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and fashion” (Engel 752). While much scholarship has been conducted on the actress’ life, interaction with material culture, public spectacle, authority, femininity, and writings, the role of an actress’ education in her success has yet to be explored adequately or examined beyond biography. My project seeks to examine the educational beginnings of actresses and I assert there are three modes of education that eighteenth-century actresses often undertook. This project examines the advantages an actress gained through her theatrical education, which participates in the conversation of “thinking about the complexities of actress’ experiences and the variety of strategies they employ to manage their personal and professional lives” (Engel 756).
DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the dreamers, the first-generation college students that are discovering how far they can fly; the pursuit of knowledge is an invaluable skill, one that betters the world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my thesis committee—Drs. Engel, Howard, and Lane—for their steadfast support and guidance as I embarked into the world of independent scholarship.

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I thank family for supporting me in this endeavor. Your support and enthusiasm has been unwavering. To my mother: thank you for listening to countless drafts of material and believing in me. To my father: thank you for cheering me on and listening to iteration after iteration. To my grandfather: thank you for teaching me to go to college and supporting my writing. I’ll write that novel one day. To my grandmother, thank you for being my inspiration in pursuing a creative lifestyle; your guidance and support has been invaluable.
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Within the last two decades, according to Laura Engel, “attention to the significance of eighteenth-century British actresses [has] blossomed into an emerging interdisciplinary field of study” (751). Leading scholars such as Sandra Richards, Robyn Aselon, Cheryl Wanko, Felicity Nussbaum, and Joseph Roach have employed and theorized methodologies to categorize, re-examine, and draw attention to the position of the actress through various approaches, particularly through the lenses of cultural materialism, new historicism, and feminism. But the realm of the actress extends beyond literary methodology as, Engel posits, “actress studies is a truly interdisciplinary field;” it “intersect[s] with art, music, literature, history, economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and fashion,” giving way to a multitude of opportunities for scholarship (752). While much scholarship has been conducted on the actress’ life¹, interaction with material culture, public spectacle, authority, femininity, and writings, the role of an actress’ education in her success has yet to be explored adequately or examined beyond biography. My project seeks to examine the educational beginnings of actresses and I assert there are three modes of education that eighteenth-century actresses often undertook. This project examines the advantages an actress gained through her theatrical education, which participates in the conversation of “thinking about the complexities of actress’ experiences and the variety of strategies they employ to manage their personal and professional lives” (Engel 756).

Unlike the structured models of education² found within schools and conduct literature, actresses did not share a set model of education where each woman had a mostly standardized

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¹ See Sandra Richards *The Rise of the English Actress* or Cheryl Wanko’s *The Roles of Authority* for further reading.
² The rigor of education women could access within the eighteenth century was largely determined by class status. According to Felicity Nussbaum, the lower classes had few opportunities to go to school and, if educated, knew how to read and memorize (Nussbaum 37). The middle-class had a more elaborate education, often studying in boarding schools while the elite, upper-middle class had access to a revitalized curriculum that, by the end of the eighteenth-century, encouraged young women to undertake a male curriculum, which allowed them to pursue intellectual interests that were previously considered masculine. While women had access to male intellectual interests, Kelley observes that “gender continued to be the distinguishing factor in the education of the sexes, and the ultimate purpose of a female’s training was not fundamentally altered” (60). Unlike men, women did not have the ability to
As the emphasis on female education increased throughout the century, the British theater also underwent a revolution. Aselon asserts that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, “actresses increasingly took on [female roles and] attempt[ed] to establish a professional and respected career . . . [onstage, they] had often come into conflict with dominant notions of desirable or socially acceptable femininity,” which highlighted the separateness of private/public spheres. Throughout the eighteenth century, especially toward the fin de siècle, “the perception of the actress as a public spectacle” continued to be at odds with what Aselon characterizes as “emergent notions . . . of the middle-class woman as [a] domestic and private [entity]” (59). Even as actresses struggled to gain recognition in the public sphere, they continued to gain more prominence and power in eighteenth-century society (Richards 24); they navigated political, social, and economic arenas, and frequently transcended class and cultural barriers, which enabled these women to cultivate economic independence, pursue intellectual interests, and construct their own celebrity images, ultimately challenging debates surrounding “women’s access to education and potential for creative expressions” (Aselon 59).

be “a fully endowed citizen” (60). Rather, Mary Kelley asserts “a woman’s needs, interests, and abilities were presumed different, and her schooling continued to prepare her for and direct her toward a role in the home” (60). This difference in education between the sexes denied the majority of women’s access to the political and public arenas as their educations prepared them to become “helpmeet[s]” to their husband and “teacher[s] of virtues to [their] husbands and sons” (60-1).

According to Sandra Richards in The Rise of the British Actress, by the mid-eighteenth century, the English actress had achieved a greater social position within British society (24).

Amanda Vickery highlights the slippage between the supposed separate spheres in the eighteenth century (9). She notes that, in the early eighteenth century, despite the dominant discourse of gender difference, “genteel families . . . were linked to the world in a multiplicity of ways, as kinsfolk, landowners, employers, and members of the elite” and “these social roles were expressed through a variety of encounters which took place in the home” (Vickery 9). Vickery, thus, revises the idea of the house as solely a woman’s domain (9). Nachumi also supports this observation, noting that despite their domestic locations and supposed separate activities, women held “social” and “political” power, which further complicates the domestic sphere attached to female identity (10). She continues, stating, “such activities remained well within the bounds of propriety for the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’ held several meanings in eighteenth-century life, not all of which corresponded to distinction between male and female spheres of activity” (10).

Recent scholarship asserts that the divide between public/private were not as separate as originally proposed (Kelley 61).
While no formal schools for actresses existed, I assert that actresses learned their craft by entering into the profession through modes of educational beginnings, inheritance, discovery, and trial and error, which permitted them access to social networks, resources, and mentorships that would later impact their success on the stage, enabling them to assume a position of prominence and public spectacle. Throughout the century, women found themselves upon the stage through inheritance and discovery. Some actresses such as the famous cross-dressing Charlotte Charke inherited the stage through familial connections in the theater, participating in what could be considered a theatrical “dynasty” and learning by close observation and imitation of other actresses (Richards 24). Actresses such as Peg Woffington and Mary Darby Robinson found the stage by being discovered by a person of theatrical prominence who took interest in a woman’s acting ability and quickly shepherded her into the culture of the stage, acting as a mentor and teaching the young charge how to become successful as the apprentice learned and mastered the techniques of the star (24). Yet, discovery and inheritance were not the only paths to success on the stage. Actresses such as Sarah Siddons learned the craft through a series of trial and error as they navigated a series of roles that did not always suit them and eventually discovered success by participating in the roles that did and gaining prominence by stellar performances in those carefully chosen roles (“Sarah Siddons”).

This project is divided into two primary sections: modes and case-studies. In the first, I attempt to map the modes of educational beginnings—inheritance, discovery, and trial and error—that actresses were participating within to gain success on the stage. In the second section, I examine four successful actresses, Charlotte Charke, Peg Woffington, Mary Darby Robinson, and Sarah Siddons, using a case-study approach to consider how these actresses capitalized upon

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6 Public spectacle, depending on the actress, could be either positive or negative. For example, Mary Robinson gained notoriety as the Prince of Wale’s mistress (Byrne viii).
their education in performance and self-fashioning. I later pair Charke and Woffington, Robinson and Siddons to highlight that while the actresses fit into a certain mode primarily, they could still experience another educational mode during their careers and that the advantages gained through their educational beginning did not guarantee success; pairing the actresses also showcases the potential for fluidity between modes as those that inherited their celebrity could also experience trial and error and those that were discovered could also eventually access the networks bestowed upon those who had inherited the stage. By further defining the three primary modes of educational beginnings, I will then illustrate how actresses were navigating these liminal frameworks to cultivate their own success as they navigated both public and private realms in their careers and education.

Inheritance

Some actresses found the theatrical world through familial connection, which gave them access to early instruction and practice on the stage through their parents or relatives. According to Russ McDonald, “a large portion of England’s greatest actors have come from theatrical families” (4). He traces “this phenomenon” back to “the traveling banks of players in late-medieval or early Tudor times” and asserts that “the intimacy and the privatization of such an occupation made it suitable for families” (4). Thomas Betterton headed one such early theatrical family when he married “the first great female Lady MacBeth, Mary Betterton (born Saunderson)” and they had “their adopted child, Anne Bracegirdle [who] also became a star of the Restoration stage” (McDonald 5). McDonald further notes that “many of [the] first English

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7 I argue that the actresses’ navigation of the educational modes is a liminal movement as, at the beginning of their journey, they often occupy a lower position in society based on their socio-economic status and other factors. Yet, after their education, they enter into a new position in society, gaining more social prominence and influence. However, until the moment when they enter the second position, they are on the precipice of success—not quite there, making any movement taken until they succeed—liminal in nature.
actresses were the wives or mistresses of the major actors of the era” (5). While the Betterton family is an early example of theatrical inheritance, this mode of theatrical entry remained dominant throughout the eighteenth century. One of the most prominent theatrical families in the eighteenth century, the Cibbers, had several successful children on the stage. In the *Account of the Life of Mrs. Cibber*, Susannah Marie Cibber, the daughter of “a Drury Lane numbered” who married a Cibber son makes her debut on “her brother’s Opera of Operas as Tom Thumb” and utilizes the familial connections of her brother and father-in-law to further her career (25-6).

While not all theatrical children became actresses or members of the stage, Sandra Richards observes that “many early eighteenth century actresses came . . . from acting families on their way to becoming dynasties” (24).

Although birth into a theatrical family did not guarantee a child success on the stage, the benefits of theatrical inheritance mirror the benefits of primogeniture in public society. According to Michelle Dowd, the law of English primogeniture establishes that “the eldest son” gains the father’s property but dictates that “in the absence of sons, a family’s land would descend to daughters, who would inherit equally” (34). The law of primogeniture, “long-standing by the seventeenth” and eighteenth centuries, reads:

That by the Law of England, without a specific Custom to the contrary, the eldest Son, or Brother, or Uncle, excludes the younger; and the Males in an equal Degree do not all inherit: But all the Daughters, whether by the same or divers Venters, do inherit together to the Father, and all the Sisters by the same Venter do inherit to the Brother (Hale 153).

This law asserts that the passing of property from parents to offspring strengthens the immediate familial bond as daughters become “preferred to . . . distant male relatives,” which “distinguishes the English system of primogeniture from its European counterparts” (Dowd 34, 41). Although theatrical sons and daughters were not guaranteed the same inheritance as landed
nobility, acting families held great influence over their trade and the sons and daughters of actors and actresses often had an earlier and easier entry into the theatrical world. Richards observes that “actresses who had family or friends connected with the theatre” often had a “viable entrée” as the next generation, like the heirs of systemic primogeniture, and gained what D.R. Woolf characterizes as a “linked legitimacy with a specific, long-standing attachment to a particular property” through familial and filial connections (41). Through the establishment of this “linked legitimacy,” the stage resembles the property of an estate as families claimed “privileged space[s]” (41). In this way, via the familial association of space and defense of territory against rivals\(^8\), inheritance of the stage parallels primogeniture in English society.

Like the daughters of the elite that had access to more education and social status, actresses who found the stage through familial or filial connection tended to gain an earlier education to the profession than those who discovered the stage through other methods. McDonald draws a parallel between children of the stage and children of the farm, noting that “children could be especially helpful to their thespian parents, just as farm children were very early made to plant and pick the crops” (6-7). Theatrical children had access to tutors earlier than others entering the profession. Through this early exposure to their parents’ trade, children of theatrical families had more opportunities to participate in their parents’ world, often becoming actresses “because . . . they entered the profession as children” (McDonald 6-7). McDonald notes that many performances “called for a character that a child actor could play, such as a fairy or perhaps just a child” (6-7). Actresses such as Sarah Siddons, a daughter of the Kemble family,

\(^8\) In acknowledging the rival threat to the acting family, I align with Felicity Nussbaum who characterizes “eighteenth-century star actresses” as “rival queens as celebrities who assumed positions formerly reserved for the royal court and other elite personages” (26). Her thesis further asserts that “performing women entered a competitive economy as rivals to each other, as well as to managers and other actors, and also to prevailing ideas about women” (26). As acting families gained power, their ability to compete, Nussbaum asserts, strengthens a competitive theatrical market (26).
took advantage of these early opportunities, “enter[ing] the profession” at age 11 when she “played the role of Ariel in *The Tempest*” (7). According to Philip Highfill, famous harpist and singer Cecilia Barthèlemon “made her debut at the Haymarket at the age of nine or ten” (362). Through early performance, children who inherited the stage had more time and resources to practice their profession and gain experience and education through familial tutelage, accessing mentorship earlier than discovered actresses or actresses navigating the stage through trial and error.

Theatrical families provided instruction informally to their children as those who inherited the stage also had the benefit of learning directly from their parents’ performances and experience in addition to more time and practice. Phillip Highfill details an early depiction of Cecilia Barthèlemon “as a young child . . . [who] traveled with her parents to the continent in 1776-77, and, according to her later letters, sat on the lap of Marie Antoinette while her parents performed” (362). In watching her parents’ performance, Barthèlemon learns earlier than most that the stage is an environment open to her. Through inheritance, Barthèlemon accesses a world of tradition where legacies and roles pass from one generation to the next (Brockett and Franklin 223). She claims what early primogeniture law calls “linked legitimacy” and her path to success becomes easier for her to envision as she watches her parents succeed on the stage before she does (Dowd 41).

In addition to gaining “linked legitimacy,” actresses who were heirs to an inheritance of theatrical legacy were not the sole beneficiary of their family’s status, networks, and fame as their husbands could also access their family’s resources (41). Suitors with theatrical backgrounds recognized the advantages that marriage into a theatrical family would bring and sought to pursue daughters of the theater in order to increase their own fame or secure their
position within the theatrical world. According to Sandra Richards, Richard Charke, “a theatre jack-of-all-trades and violinist” married one of Colley Cibber’s daughters “for what advantage [Richard] could get” (36). In recognizing the power of the family connections and viewing the match as “advantage[ous],” Richard pursues the daughter of a theatrical family to further his own career (36). Marriage of interest was not uncommon and represented a larger movement that feminist theorist Helene Moglen outlines as “the daughter’s story” where suitors solicited the daughter’s attention to gain access to the father’s resources (6).

Actresses who found the eighteenth-century stage through familial connection via birth or marriage also had access to their parents or in-laws’ social networks, which afforded them admittance to well-established theatrical connections and informal supports systems that increased their likelihood of success. According to Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, “all levels of [English] society depended on informal networks of support, including charitable giving but also less easily traced methods of gift giving and property distribution such as casual favors, filial support to aging parents, and lifetime gifts among kin” (376). The stage parallels this network as acting families also gained access to similar exchanges and relied on “informal networks of support” such as maintaining and forming relationships with persons of theatrical importance (376). Ben-Amos further asserts that “[g]ift giving and support were essential to parent-child interaction and familial configurations, and they abounded within networks of kin, neighbors, and associates in the rural countryside as well as amidst urban environments and associations” (376). While her analysis does not extend to the theater, Ben-Amos’ observations still apply as these systems of inheritance are prevalent on the stage and stood to be inherited and revised throughout generations. Unlike traditional inheritance which took the form of concrete goods, Ben-Amos asserts that “through these informal systems, wealth and goods were distributed
among families and friends throughout the course of their lives, rather than near or at the moment of death,” which makes the advantages gained through these networks more lasting and influential than only one exchange of social resources (10).

Children gained not only their parents’ networks of support and early education in their parents’ craft but also public recognition of their parents’ legacies. Philip Highfill describes Cecilia Barthèlemon, as “the daughter of Francois and Mary Barthèlemon,” which ties her to the acting family of “Thomas A. Arne” who was “the Drury Lane house servant and patriarch of one of the most important musical-theatrical families in England during the eighteenth century” (362, 106). According to Highfill, Cecilia’s namesake was “her great-aunt Cecilia Young Arne, the celebrated singer and wife of Thomas A. Arne” (362). By carrying on the name of her “great-aunt,” Cecilia’s identity becomes tied to the Arne legacy, which lends her legitimacy on the stage as she ascends to her rightful place similarly as an heir ascends a throne. Like Cecilia, Charlotte Charke gained access to the stage as “the youngest of Drury Lane manager Colley Cibber’s seven children” (Richards 36). The Cibber dynasty became integral to her identity as her father’s celebrity continually impacted her reputation as she borrowed the fame and reputation of her parents to inform her own path on the stage, training in stage tradition and learning techniques passed down as an art form from one generation to the next. While success on the stage during the eighteenth century was not as simple as being born into the profession, inheriting a theatrical legacy resulted in a position that afforded great opportunity for a budding young actress making her debut with an audience already familiar with her family’s name and presence in the eighteenth-century theatrical world.
Discovery

While some actresses inherited the stage, other women often found themselves upon the stage through discovery, which granted them access to a tutor that would teach them to perform theatrical traditions onstage. Actresses such as Peg Woffington and Mary Darby Robinson found the stage by being discovered by a person of theatrical prominence who took interest in a woman’s acting ability and quickly shepherded her into the culture of the stage, acting as a mentor and teaching the young charge how to become successful. According to Sandra Richards, aspiring “actresses from . . . down-at-heel families frequented public places where their talents might be discovered by influential theatre people” (24). Once an actress was discovered, Felicity Nussbaum observes, “tutors assumed a proprietary role over trained apprentices and could lease or even sell them to theater companies” (35). For aspiring actresses, their best chance for discovery led to the “theatre booths of provincial fairgrounds” where they might encounter a stage tutor (Richards 25).

The process of discovery resulted in a master-apprentice relationship between the stage tutor and the aspiring actress where the charge was trained in what Nussbaum calls the “art of social emulation” (44). Actresses were not only expected to learn the ways of the stage but also expected to learn how to “mov[e] through the social classes in drama and in life while mastering the etiquette of nobility” (44). During this training, actresses formed their own social networks and learned how to cross class boundaries both on and off the stage, adjusting their performance to the role and the audience. Through this training in “social emulation,” actresses “reveal[ed] the performative nature of social status to audiences consisting of tradespersons, citizens’ wives, ladies of quality, and even queens,” demonstrating their power in all levels of society (Nussbaum 44).
Once discovered, aspiring actresses joined their tutor to hone their powerful techniques through a well-established master-apprentice system where tutelage resulted in “entering a company on a probationary status” and “observing established performers” (Brockett and Franklin 219). After joining a company, a beginning actor or actress “played an enormous number of small roles each season and eventually discovered the types for which they were best suited,” which allowed the actress to play roles that strengthened her persona. The actress participated in a theatrical system that, according to Brockett and Franklin, held “four clearly distinguishable ranks”: “(1) players of leading roles, (2) players of secondary roles, (3) players of third-line parts, and (4) general utility performers” (219). As actresses continued to learn whilst participating in a company, Nussbaum asserts that those “early modern apprentices in the craft of acting were usually tutored by individual masters to whom they were bound, rather than being instructed within the “larger theater troupe,” which afforded the apprentices close one-on-one instruction in the art usually by those “player[s] of leading roles” (Nussbaum 34; Brockett and Franklin 219).

Participating in theatrical apprenticeship granted access to a world that trained its actresses in theatrical traditions that resulted in beginners learning a large number of roles quickly. According to Brockett and Franklin, stars learned “roles [that] were passed down from one generation to the next, and with them went the traditional interpretation” (219). When “one actor [or actress] succeeded another, he or she was expected to learn the business used in that company, since the repertory could not be restaged to suit one actor” (219). Within this “repertory system,” actresses were expected to know a large number of roles and be able to be

---

9 According to Leopold Wagner in *How to Get on the Stage and How to Succeed There* (1899), a “general utility [would] play any part the stage-manager cast him for, often two or three small parts on the same evening,” which gave these new members of the company an opportunity to develop a “line of business” in which the actor or actress was “best suited” to perform (66).
performance ready “on a 24-hour notice” (219). Thus, in addition to mastering traditional roles and memorizing parts, actresses also had to learn the essential skill of versatility, learning not only how to perform in a certain company but also how to recall learned roles in a short period of time. According to Brockett and Franklin, Barton Booth had approximately “thirty-five” roles in the repertory, Garrick, ninety-six, and Anne Oldfield had around “twenty-six” (219). These roles were memorized through careful instruction. An acting apprentice maintained a good memory, which was a quality, according to Nussbaum, that was sought by stage tutors seeking apprentices as a good memory was a necessity for an actress or actor joining the repertory system (37).

According to Nussbaum, “from the beginning, actresses would have been recruited primarily from among those who could read, or at least memorize easily by rote, requiring their possessing a certain basic quickness and education” (37). These actress’ talents were then cultivated through a combination of individual effort as they “prepared lines on their own” and “occasional coaching from a fellow actor who might have greater experience” (37). If aspiring actresses did not gain an individual tutor, Nussbaum observes that “some companies” established “a trial period of acting for three months without salary”, which “resembled a sort of apprenticeship that would have allowed inexperienced players to attend rehearsals and to attempt to learn parts from veteran members of the company” (44).

While some companies adopted aspiring actresses as charges, the most common form of master-apprenticeship involved the “star actress” or actor-managers teaching “aspiring” young pupils (Nussbaum 44). Many famous eighteenth-century actresses had the benefit of tutelage informing their career. According to William Egerton, “the Bettertons schooled . . . Mary Porter, and Lady Davenant is believed to have tutored Elizabeth Barry for her role in The Man of Mode” (4). Egerton observes that Anne “Oldfield’s biography credits her lover’s training” as
contributing “heavily to her [own] success as a player” (4). Oldfield’s “apprenticeship” relied on what Nussbaum classifies as a “more informal kind of apprentice system” where actresses learned gestures, movement, and enunciation from the playwrights who wrote for them, or from the male actors who were their lovers or husbands” (22). These informal apprenticeships like the master-tutor system still trained their pupils in the art of tradition, requiring a good memory from their charge and careful instruction on the nuances of performance from the master or more experienced player.

Aspiring actresses frequented locales that increased their likelihood of being discovered by a stage tutor in the eighteenth century. According to Sybil Rosenfeld, in addition to discovering actresses within the provinces, stage-tutors frequented “certain inns in the neighborhood of Covent Garden which were used as houses of call” in London “where country managers could be sure of meeting unemployed comedians” (12). These establishments “were frequented by all ranks and kinds and you would find there ‘a well-dressed gentleman of the Theatre-Royal in earnest conversation with a Country Player without a shirt’” (Rosenfeld 12). With a locale established for finding aspiring stage personnel, a stage-tutor had unrestricted access for selecting an apprentice of choice. Rosenfeld details this process, noting that the manager asked for the actor or actress’ theatrical experience and the number of “lengths” an actor or actress could study nightly (12). A length consisted of forty-two lines and the number of lengths that a charge could study greatly determined his or her success on the stage as an actor or actress could be called upon a part within a two or three-day notice in the country theaters and a twenty-four-hour notice in theatrical centers such as London (Rosenfeld 12; Nussbaum 44). While stage-tutors frequented these establishments and vetted potential apprentices, managers of
theatrical companies also sent recruiters to discover young charges with acting potential and good memory (12-3).

While many actresses rose to fame as the products of discovery, those that were discovered still faced many disadvantages compared to those who gained the stage through inheritance, lacking not only time, finances, and social connections that extended generations but also the potential for borrowed celebrity as actresses of theatrical dynasties linked their names to their families’ legacies. Unlike inheritance, actresses who were discovered did not have access to acting legacies over generations nor did they stand to profit from their parents’ celebrity. Most discovered actresses, John Harold Wilson asserts, came from “genteel poor women” (10). With no parents providing early instruction and opportunities for their children on the stage, discovered actresses had to learn the environment of the stage in a similar manner that an apprentice undertook a trade, studying under masters or stars until the apprentice was able, if they were able, to assume the position of the master. On the stage, a newly discovered actress was trained either by the company or the tutor to learn conventions of their trade. According to Russ McDonald, “performers were conscious of the need to present an imitation of nature, to bring out a character’s ‘natural’ and distinctive qualities” (24). These conventions were, McDonald continues, “fairly strict” (24). Actresses learned “gestures [that] were codified and affixed to particular emotions” (24). These gestures were handed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, tutor to apprentice, and, as a result, the conventions of the stage began to become recognizable to their audience as actresses performed them, which allowed certain gestures to transcend generations as more and more actresses mastered the conventions of their craft (24).
An actress’ discovery and subsequent training overlaps with an actress receiving the stage as an inheritance. Both methods of theatrical education encouraged learning in the traditions of theatrical practice where performance drew on ritual (Franklin and Brockett 219). Actresses learned their gestures, movements, and enunciations as separate from themselves and applicable in character, learning to “efface” themselves in their characters and drawing on highly stylized movements that signaled an experienced audience to the effect they wanted to communicate (Roach 59). While actresses trained in tradition were praised at the beginning and mid-eighteenth century, by the fin de siècle, a call for a more innovative learning strategy emerged.

**Trial and Error & Self-Study**

While the early methods of learning through inheritance and discovery did lead to success on the stage, by the end of the eighteenth-century, a new mode of learning the stage began to emerge. This methodology built on the traditional process of learning that was experienced by those that inherited the stage or became products of discovery: actresses who trained in codified theatrical conventions and then assumed a line of roles well-suited to them. A new method, often experienced in provincial nursery companies, pushed past the limits of tradition and reacted to a cultural shift, a paradoxical call for authenticity in prescribed performance, that necessitated a change in the way actresses were learning their craft (Rosenfeld 12). The first half of this methodology consisted of trial and error, which ensured that an actress was honing parts that suited her nature as she undertook a variety of roles. Rather than simply narrow the roles to a line that was “best suited” to her, the actress that undertook this methodology carefully studied the role to ensure that it was one she could succeed at performing (Brockett and Franklin 219). This careful self-study is what sets this methodology apart from the traditional learning found in inheritance and discovery.
Just as education was showcasing a heightened sense of individualism and early feminist thought called for radical revision of the female curriculum, the theater also found itself in the midst of transition as cultural anxiety called for theatrical reform of female performance. According to Helen Brooks, throughout the eighteenth-century, society experienced cultural anxiety over “the falsity of appearances” as “women’s abilities to falsify their external appearance and social interaction were a constant source of anxiety” (100). Brooks asserts that “contemporaries . . . [were] all too aware . . . that the female body not only had the ability to reveal its true interiority but could also conceal and fake” (100). This possible duplicity, Brooks observes, led to a change “by the end of the century [where] the earlier mode of performance in which the actor [or actress] transformed themselves in[to] another had become increasingly at odds with prevailing discourse,” which called for authenticity (99). Brooks argues that this movement away from tradition “was a significant reversal of the way in which earlier actresses had been expected to perform” and that “since the mid-century innovations of actors like David Garrick and acting theorists including John Hill. . . performers had been counselled to surrender themselves to the role, effacing their own identities so that they could transform themselves into another person” (98). Actresses like Hannah Pritchard who had once been applauded by John Hill for taking “‘with her nothing that is peculiar to herself into the character’” now faced a dilemma as the audience called for an authentic persona where the identities of character and performer blended and bled into one another (Hill 60-1).

In response to the cultural anxiety surrounding falsity, the early and mid-eighteenth century saw a rise in conduct literature, which influenced the carefully crafted “openness” and “authentic” persona that actresses who practiced the methodology of trial and error found themselves honing. In *Letter to a Young Lady*, John Bennett encourages women to practice an
‘unstudied openness’ (emphasis his) as he asserts, ‘young people are, generally, the most amiable, that are most undisguised’ (Bennett 80). By the end of the eighteenth century, the ‘unstudied openness’ that Bennett had recommended women hone in his conduct literature was reaching the theatrical world as eighteenth-century society had begun to respond to artificiality more negatively (Bennett 80). According to McDonald, “the greatest performers were expected to cultivate a kind of histrionic sprezzatura, assuming a demanding role without apparent difficulty or effort” (27). While sprezzatura was achievable through tutelage that led to artificiality as, according to the “1744 Essay on the Theatres,” “all actors [and actresses] are to seem what they are not . . . [and] themselves must be forgot,” the call for “‘unstudied openness’” actually necessitated the opposite of separate identities for a performer and his or her character as well as an avoidance of codified gestures and other theatrical traditions (Anon 548; Bennett 80). To appear authentic, actresses had to be well-practiced in theatrical techniques and assume roles that they could innovate; successful actresses, according to McDonald, “turned [a] fresh gaze on each of [their] roles, identifying and exploiting moments in which alteration of tone or the sudden gesture might enhance” their characters (26). The conventions that were once celebrated as adhering to theatrical tradition emphasized the constructed artificiality of the stage. To overcome this sense of artificiality, an actress carefully chose and studied her role so that she might increase the likelihood of what McDonald classifies as “natural representation of character” (26). As the demand for “natural representation increased,” the need to “rethink” the popular conventions of the eighteenth-century stage also grew as the “gestures and inflections . . . prescribed by tradition” transitioned to “a fresh and sometimes controversial manner” (McDonald 25-6).
Before she could innovate a role, an actress practicing trial and error needed to uncover roles that were best-suited to her in order to cultivate her authentic persona. The provincial theaters provided more opportunity for trial and error than the London stage companies did. Rosenfeld details the wide variety of roles that actors and actresses could play in the early eighteenth-century provinces such as those acting in Norwich, Ipswich, York, Kent, and Bath (Rosenfeld 35-239). According to Rosenfeld, “the tragedians wanted to try themselves out in comedy, and the comedians fancied themselves in tragedy” (13). As the century continued, actresses began to limit the number of roles they would play as they started to hone their type, choosing a carefully selected group of roles that they could assume by forgetting their own identity during the character performance (13). By the end of the eighteenth century, actresses such as Dorothy Jordan and Sarah Siddons had begun to craft personas that were perceived as original and authentic by the audience both on and offstage. According to Brooks, “throughout their careers, Jordan and Siddons’s successes in affecting sincerity were reliant not only on their development of the theatrical techniques . . . but also on their careful management and coherence both of their stock of roles, and of their on- and off-stage personas” (109). This constant management necessitated a carefully studied self-awareness that allowed these actresses to become cultural icons and craft acting techniques that embraced self-study and self-discipline.

Through trial and error, actresses at the end of the eighteenth century were constructing their celebrity by breaking theatrical tradition, reinventing theatrical conventions, and carefully choosing roles that suited their natures. They also allowed the public access to a hybridized identity—one of artificiality and authenticity—as they crafted a persona that blended their personal qualities and attributes with the roles they assumed, allowing them to be viewed in public as expressions of openness and sincerity, which transformed their performances as they
left the old theatrical tradition that called for them to erase their own identities and put on their character disguise. Gillian Russell calls attention to Siddons’ success, noting that her “distinctive status in late Georgian culture was secured by her formidable creative powers that enabled her to transcend the pejorative associations of femininity” and assume the distinction of “manly” genius as she performed both “masculinity and femininity,” which she achieved through self-study and trial and error (440). Like the cultural shift occurring in female education and early feminist thought, actresses that sought to define themselves through trial and error blazed their own path as they constructed their own personas. Through careful self-study, actresses such as Siddons and Jordan who practiced this new methodology of learning were gaining more power and prominence both on and off the eighteenth-century stage (Russell 440).

In order to explicate how actresses that followed different methodologies were successful in learning their craft throughout the eighteenth century, this project details four case studies in the next section, analyzing the following famous actresses in the British theater: Charlotte Charke (1713-60), Peg Woffington (1720-60), Mary Robinson (1757-1800), and Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). To further understand the impact these theatrical educational modes had on an actress’ career, the case studies will also be grouped in pairs. Charke and Woffington were contemporaries and performed in the earlier half of the century; in addition, both actresses were famous for their breeches’ roles and their ability to successfully don and perform male roles (Nussbaum 35). Robinson and Siddons both performed in the latter half of the eighteenth century and drew on the public’s perception of them to inform their celebrity; these two women crafted their celebrities through a variety of mediums on and offstage, leading to a reputation that proceeded them. Pairing these women chronologically will lead to greater insights in the transitioning educational environment of the theater.
Charlotte Charke: A Case Study of Inheritance

1717: Charlotte Charke, “having even then [at four years old], a passionate fondness for a Periwig,” crawled out of bed and stole “a Wig and a Waistcoat” from her father, Colley Cibber, and marched in a ditch, gathering a crowd of onlookers and the delight of her parents (2). Born into a life of performance, Charke inherited the stage from her family. According to Katheryn Shevelow, “Charke’s life encompassed the theater world” at “its heights” as “she inhabited a demimonde of players both famous and infamous, celebrated and obscure” and played in “Covent Garden’s sumptuous royal theaters” (4). As the daughter of an already established, famous actor, Charlotte Cibber Charke’s privileged position in theatrical society allowed her access to a masculine education, enabled her to develop her performative skills as a child, and granted her access to an informal network of theatrical connections that she continually drew on throughout her life, which are benefits that actresses who inherited the theater enjoyed.

The memoir, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*, situates Charke’s life as the daughter of a famous actor and details her early childhood experiences where she observes and mimics her parents’ theatrical performances. Sue Churchill observes, through her memoir, Charke positions herself as a written authority and draws attention to her various identities as she details her life of performance (72-73). Heather Lobban-Viravong calls attention to Charke’s “impetus for writing” the *Narrative*, noting that not only does the actress manage to masquerade and cloak herself in a variety of roles but that she also uses the text as a public plea to her father after their estrangement, seeking forgiveness while simultaneously reminding her audience of her identity as a Cibber (196). While scholarship on Charke as an actress is diverse, Christine Cloud (2009) notes that her “autobiographical narrative” remains “under-examined” and I find that

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10 According to Katheryn Shevelow, Colley Cibber was “the famous Drury Lane actor and the reigning poet laureate of England during the eighteenth century” (4).
despite recent attention to the *Narrative*, scholars have yet to adequately address the early educational opportunities of observation and imitation that the actress showcases within the text (Cloud 857).

**A “Masculine” Education**

As the social position of the eighteenth-century actor or actress improved, daughters of theatrical acting families could access an elite educational background similar to the sons and daughters of middle and upper-class society. According to A.S. Turberville, author of *English Men and Manners in the Eighteenth Century*, education for daughters of the elite often consisted of simple arithmetic, English, French, Italian, writing, drawing, dancing, music, and needlework (161). Charke acknowledges her elite educational background in the first few pages of her memoir. In recalling her early childhood, she states:

> As I have instanced, that my Education was not only a genteel, but in Fact a liberal one, and such indeed as might have been sufficient for a Son instead of a Daughter; I must beg Leave to add, that I was never made much acquainted with the necessary Utensil which forms the housewifely Part of a young Lady’s Education call’d a Needle; which I handle with the same clumsey Awkwardness a Monkey does a Kitten” (12).

In highlighting her inexperience and “clumsey Awkwardness” with a needle, Charke distances herself from her inherited identity as that of a woman who had access to a traditionally elite eighteenth-century female education where women were instructed to be moral creatures dedicated to earthly comforts rather than engaged with intellectual pursuits fit “for a Son” (Charke 12; Melville 129-31). Charke highlights this distance when she notes, early in her narrative, that Mr. Flaubaut, “an excellent Master of Languages [who] was employed at her school,” had “perceive[d] that [she] was too close in the Pursuit of Knowledge not absolutely needful, [and therefore] shorten’d the various Tasks she had daily set [herself.]” sending her
home (16-17). In recognizing that her “Pursuit of Knowledge” was no longer “needful,” Mr. Flaubaut decides to send the young girl home as the purpose of her education, to teach women domestic duties and learn to be a future companion to a man, is fulfilled (Charke 16-7; Melville 129-31).

From the locale to the curriculum, Charke’s early education shapes her celebrity as a daughter of an elite actor. In her narrative, she notes that “at eight Years of Age [she] was placed at a famous School in Park Street, Westminster, governed by one Mrs. Draper, a Woman of great Sense and Abilities, who employed a Gentleman, call’d Monsieur Flaubaut, an excellent Master of Languages, to instruct her Boarders” (16). Caroline Cowles Richards characterizes the environment of female education as inferior to a male education with little to no opportunity for career advancement, noting that “before 1860 . . . people thought boys and girls had different educational needs” and so “girls attended private schools called seminaries. At seminaries, girls . . . also learned dance, drawing, and needlework. People thought these classes taught social skills and prepared girls to be good homemakers” (7). While Charke is quick to distance herself from needlework and the persona of a traditional domestic woman, her narrative reveals that she did have traditional curriculum in addition to her liberal curriculum, when she fondly remembers one of her teachers and states:

The celebrated Mr. Grofconet was my Dancing-Masterl and, to do Justice to his Memory, I have never met any that exceeded him in the easy sublime taste in Dancing, which is the most reasonable Entertainment can be afforded to the Spectators, who wish only to be delighted with the genteel Movement of a Singular, or Plurality of Figures, with becoming Gracefulness; on which no Performer ever so eminently distinguished themselves as Mrs. Booth, Widow of the late incomparable and deservedly-esteemed Barton Booth, Esq; one of the Patentees of Drury-Lane Theatre, conjunctive with my Father and Mr. Wilks (17).

In this description of Mr. Grofconet, Charke highlights her very early exposure to dancing and performance in school; however, she also directs her audience’s attention away from her
traditional education as a middle-to-upper class attendee of a “famous” school (17). She, instead, redirects her attribution of her performative instruction not only to the school’s master but also with her family, reinforcing her identity as the daughter of an acting family as she compares her educational masters to one of the three theatrical mainstays in eighteenth-century theater: Barton Booth, Mr. Wilks, and Colley Cibber. This rhetorical move serves to reinforce her identity as a daughter of the theater, drawing her audience’s attention to her inheritance.

Charke’s education prepares her to fulfill what Moglen defines as “the daughter’s story” where women were prepared from infancy to become wives and mothers (6). This story “assumes the female’s embeddedness in the family” as the primary patriarchal figure of the house accepts a suitable candidate to assume his role, governing the female, and culminates in the primary patriarchal figure’s replacement with the suitor (6). In this traditional narrative, the daughter takes the position of a transactional piece, which transfers from one house to the other when a new patriarchal figure becomes approved by the family. The suitor then joins the father’s family and enjoys the benefits of joint familial resources (6). Through this process, a new communal bond emerges through a marital match that solidifies connection and community between men by joining households and grants access to both families’ material wealth and social networks (6). Successful matches either sustained familial wealth and advantages or increased the family’s prosperity either through wealth, connection, or investment (Moglen 6). In the same way that landed gentry often arranged marriages, elite families with educated daughters would seek suitable matches that benefited the family.

Charke highlights her experience of the “daughter’s story” when she relays her mother’s behavior during her illness. She states, “my Mother, who was apprehensive of my Death, and consequently, thro’ excessive fondness, us’d all Means to prevent it that lay within her Power,
sent me to Thorly, in Herfordshire, the seat of Dr. Hales, an eminent Physician and Relation, with a Design not only to restore and establish my Health, but with the Hopes of my being made a good Housewifel” (19). In relaying this incident, Charke draws attention to the past possibility of the Cibber and Hale alliance where the youngest Cibber daughter would have married an “eminent Physician and Relation” if she would have only consented (19). Charke again reflects on the lost opportunity of her traditional trajectory when she later marries against her mother’s advice and pens that at the moment of marriage with Richard Charke, she was “in the happy Possession of [her] Father’s Heart; which, had [she] known the real Value of, [she] should have never bestowed a Moment’s Thought in the obtaining of Mr. Charke’s, but preserving [her] Father’s” (29). According to Charke, if she could rewrite the past, she would have most certainly listened to her mother’s wishes and fulfilled her duty as the daughter of Colley Cibber, which “would have rendered [her] less troublesome in a Family, and more useful to [herself], and those about [her]” (19). However, Charke does not choose the match her mother presents to her, which would have resulted in mutual family benefits and continued parental approval (Charke 19). She, instead, chooses to dedicate her future to intellectual pursuits that an early exposure to a more masculine education provided her (19-20).

Rather than welcome her position as a daughter of the middle to upper-class on the cusp of womanhood, Charke shuns the traditional narrative of the “daughter’s story” and, instead, embraces a liberal, masculine education, which her parents’ benefactions enable her to access (Moglen 6). She classifies her education as “not only . . . genteel but . . . liberal” and states that her education “might have been sufficient for a Son instead of a Daughter” (12). During her childhood education, she learns Latin, Italian and geography and also has the ability to perform masculine intellectual pursuits and careers, such as medicine and becoming a groom, which
further distances her from the feminine pursuits that traditional women undertook and positions her as a pursuer of knowledge and a naive performer (Charke 21-4).

Charke moves beyond traditional female education when she relays her parents’ consent to an extending curriculum. Within her Narrative, Charke recounts Monsieur Flabaut’s discovery of her “tolerable Genius” and his advice to her mother that she should “let him teach [her] Latin and Italian” (16). Flabaut’s decision to instruct Charke in Latin moves her beyond the elite female curriculum that Tuberville outlines where girls would have been learning Italian and French while boys would have had access to more languages such as Latin (161). Monsieur Flabaut also gets “leave of [Charke’s] Parents to instruct [her] in Geography,” which is a “Science” traditionally learned by men11 (17). This extended curriculum Charke learns from Mr. Flabaut includes areas of interest that are traditionally accessed by men through male-to-male tutelage (Turberville 161). And yet, Charke, a female, accesses and excels in these subjects.

Charke’s masculine education is not only supported but fiercely encouraged by her enthusiastic parents, which enables her to pursue her studies to the point of “distract[ion]” (17). Due to their success and high social class compared to actresses entering the theatrical world through discovery12, Charke’s parents provide her with all the supplies needed to undertake her intellectual pursuits, “furnish[ing] her with proper Books, and two Globes, caelestial and terrestrial, borrow’d [from her] my Mother’s own Brother, the late John Shore, Esq; Serjeant - Trumpet of England” who was an educated man (16-7). Given the same technologies that men use in their intellectual pursuits, Charke throws herself into her studies, pow[ing] over ‘em, ‘till [she] had like to have been as mad as [her] Uncle” (17). Her parents’ ability to access such rare

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11 Charke highlights the strangeness of a female learning geography in her statement, “which, by the Bye, tho’ I know it to be a most useful and pleasing Science, I cannot think it was altogether necessary for a Female” (17).
12 Sandra Richards observes that many actresses that were products of discovery came from “down-at-heel families” (24).
resources for their daughter’s education elevates Charke’s position to that of an elite, liberally educated woman that pushes against the confines of traditional roles and solidifies her family’s position in the middle-to-upper class (Richards 7). According to Caroline Cowles Richards, middle-to-upper class girls educated in seminaries “before 1860 . . . studied some of the same subjects [that] boys did,” but boys were raised for a different purpose: careers and intellectual pursuit (7). Women who were traditionally educated via a curriculum of the social elite, which Caroline Cowles Richards considers the middle-to-upper class and aristocrats, found their access to the male realm of education denied even if in their youth they had a slight taste of the “various Kinds” of education available to both sexes as these women ended their education and transitioned to the daughter’s story, becoming wives and mothers (Charke 12; Cowles 7).

While traditional women use their educations in the domestic sphere, Charke rejects the role of wife, arguing that her masculine education enables her to pursue intellectual interests rather than govern a household. Her refusal to adhere to traditional marriage stems from the “vast Application of [her] Study” (17). She states, “my Education consisted chiefly in Studies of various Kinds, and gave me a different Turn of Mind than what I might have had, if my Time had been employ’d in ornamenting a Piece of Canvas with Beasts, Births, and the Alphabet; the latter of which I understood in French rather before I was able to speak English” (12). This statement becomes indicative of her intellectual ability to exceed traditional female education as she highlights her aptitude for languages, noting that she was already excellent “in French before [she] was able to speak English” and that she had “a different Turn of Mind,” which sets her apart from other educated women and enables her to position her future cross-dressing celebrity as a product of her early childhood (12). As Charke outlines her masculine education, she masterfully demonstrates the intellectual prowess that she was able to develop as the daughter of
Colley Cibber\textsuperscript{13}. Her liberal education opens possibilities beyond the domestic sphere and thrusts Charke into a world of public spectacle where she performs various roles associated with masculinity (17).

**Daughter of the Theater**

Through her upbringing and her parents’ encouragement, Charke chooses to pursue a performative and intellectual life, encountering a “masculine” freedom that is only sustained through parental consent and artificial performance (17). Inspired by her masculine education that fostered intellectual growth in subjects of interest, Charke becomes fascinated by the study of medicine. She notes that she “grew passionately fond of the Study of Physick” and “was never so truly happy, as when the Doctor employed [her] in some little Offices” where she was tasked with “call[ing] upon one or other of the neighboring Invalids” (21). As she enacts this “office,” she sees her visit to the doctor’s patients as a “most pleasing Opportunity” to “fancy” herself as “a Physician” (21). In fancying becoming a doctor, Charke begins to perform the role\textsuperscript{14}. She uses her imagination and acting ability to impersonate the doctor, an intellectual pursuit not fully attainable to her, and uses her parents’ influence to perform her fancies (21-2).

Charke continually draws upon her parents’ encouragement and indulgences to practice her early performances. In her first performance, masquerading as her father, she recounts an early parental approval, noting that “The Drollery of my Figure rendered it impossible, assisted by the Fondness of both Father and Mother, to be angry with me; but, alas! I was borne off on the Footman’s Shoulders, to my Shame and Disgrace, and forc’d into my proper Habiliments”

\textsuperscript{13} I assert Charlotte Cibber Charke’s identity cannot be divorced from her parents’ theatrical celebrity as her identity is informed by her upbringing and the public’s widespread knowledge of her parents.

\textsuperscript{14} I assert that Charke begins to perform the role of doctor because she cannot assume the position of the doctor as she does not have access to masculine education and cannot fully dedicate her life to intellectual pursuits that she fancies, resulting in an artificial performance that is supported by her parents (Charke 21).
Her parent’s lack of anger in the first performance encourages Charke to continue her performance of others. According to Shevelow, “Charlotte received [an] unusual education [and upbringing] because her affectionate parents indulged their youngest child” (69). Through “their tender Care of [her] Education,” Charke recognizes her parents’ “Fondness” for their daughter, depicting her father’s indulgence as a “paternal Love [which] omitted nothing that could improve any natural Talents Heaven had been pleased to endow [her] with” (11). In enabling their daughter’s education, the Cibber family by providing the resources to fuel Charke’s intellect and imagination as well as her propensity for performance enables their daughter to begin self-fashioning her masculine celebrity as she begins to imitate roles often assumed by men. Jade Higa draws attention to Charke’s self-fashioning, noting that she “manipulate[s] her social position and her gender performance” by “us[ing] clothing and material culture to distinguish her fluctuating character” as she “take[s] on the roles of Physician, Gardner, Stable Boy, Shopkeeper, Puppeteer, Baker, Female and Male Actor” (1). Her ability to “fluctuate her character” distances her from other members of her sex that move to fulfill the traditional narrative of wife and mother.

Throughout her performances, the Cibbers continually support their daughter’s desires. Charke highlights the parental consent that made her masquerades possible when she relays her return to the house after desiring to become a doctor (21). She notes that “no sooner [than she] arrived,” she “persuaded [her] fond Mother to let [her] have a little Closet, built in an Apartment seldom used, by Way of Dispensatory” (21). Her mother readily agrees and Charke’s stage to perform as a doctor becomes “easily obtained” through her mother’s support (21). Without parental support, Charke alone would not have the resources to continue practicing performance.

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15 Charlotte Cibber will later marry Richard Charke who sees her as an opportunity to exploit, marrying her for interest rather than love, becoming Charlotte Charke (29).
She requires her parents’ indulgence to don what she sees as various roles available to her, entering into opportunities such as Gardner and Groom, which are masculine professions (20-2). She sees her performances as imitations, stating, “I thought it always proper to imitate the Actions of those Persons, whose Characters I chose to represent; and, indeed, was as changeable as Proteus,” highlighting the artificiality of her roles (24). Supported through parental encouragement, Charke begins blend what Jean Marsden characterizes as “the histrionics that set the Cibbers apart from their audience,” which ties her to the world of artificiality and imitation, and the “sham-private’ world of the Cibber family” as she begins to cultivate a celebrity that engages with “the idea of self-representation” and blurs the boundaries between the private and public worlds (74).

Not only does Charke draw upon her parents’ encouragement, she also uses the credit of her family name and her parents’ success to persuade the public to participate in her artificial performances, crafting a celebrity that capitalizes on a public masculine persona and the inheritance she has gained. She uses the widespread knowledge of the Cibber name to momentarily convince the public of an authentic performance. According to Danielle Gissinger, “Charke succeeds in projecting a convincing lifelike performance, but when representing it in narrative form, she emphasizes the degree to which it is a constructed, fictitious role” (251)

Recounting her return home, Charke tells of the “good Woman” who upon “knowing [her] family, entrusted [her] with a Cargo of Combustibles” (22). In lieu of payment, the woman, “knowing” the Cibber name “entrust[s]” Charke with the medicine, momentarily authorizing and participating in the actress’ artificial performance. However, the artificiality of Charke’s masculine performance is soon revealed when Colley Cibber uncovers his daughter’s expenditures as evidenced by the memory, “But, Oh! Woeful Day! The Widow sent her Bill to
my Father, who was entirely ignorant of the curious Experience I had put him to; which he
directly paid, with a Strict Order never to let Doctor Charlotte have any farther Credit, on Pain of
losing the Money” (22). Charke’s father unmasks the artificiality of her performance, but does
not prohibit her from donning the mask of Physician again as she soon “resolves not to give up
her Profession” and endeavors “to conceal her Disgrace” by resorting to herbs, continuing her
artifice under the reputation of familial authority until another opportunity for masculine
performance presents itself (22). Her move “to conceal her Disgrace” highlights the artificiality
of her role as she cannot authentically assume the identity of Physician and instead uses her
performative talents to masquerade as authentic in the world until her artifice becomes revealed
and she must transition to a different role (22).

Charke attributes these artificial performances, her imitations of masculine characters, to
her parents’ willingness to allow their daughter to follow her own path, which enables her to
assume authority in her celebrity by drawing on familial ties and indulgences, observing her
parent’s performances, and mimicking their techniques at an early age. She recognizes her
parents’ role in her performances, stating, “Tis certain, nothing but my Mother’s excessive
Fondness could have blinded her Reason, to give in to my unprecedented ridiculous Follies”
(Charke 28). In excusing the parental support she receives as a product of love, Charke details a
world of theatricality where her family understands and indulges her desire to imitate the
masculine characters around her, leaving reason behind in service to their daughter’s happiness.
Obtaining the parental support to perform, Charke, according to Marsden, “present[s] herself
from childhood as an actress, always adopting a new persona to present to the world,” which
allows the actress to situate her life as a series of performances, tying her to the theatrical world
she inherited from birth to adulthood (75). As she situates her life as a series of performances,
Charke highlights the construction of self as performance, which sets her apart from other women in the middle-class and situates her as a clear product of her family as she inherits the theatrical world by obtaining her parents’ favor\textsuperscript{16}.

While her family and she later become estranged, the indulgence and support the young actress gains in her early upbringing solidifies Charke’s position as the daughter of Colley Cibber, giving her early access to the informal social network her family name provides her. This access carries not only to her performance but also to her marketability as a spouse. While Sidonie Smith reinforces Marsden’s commentary on the role of parental consent in Charke’s upbringing, she also observes, “attentiveness to the father was particularly critical for a woman of the eighteenth-century” as “the father provided protection. Under his roof and under his authority, the daughter could be sure of survival” (86). Colley Cibber’s support aligns with the “[g]ift giving and support” that Ben-Amos considers “essential to parent-child interaction and familial configurations” as the Cibber family continually gifts their daughter the means for performative success and they encourage her endeavors (376). Her family name provides her access to “networks of kin, neighbors, and associates in the rural countryside as well as amidst urban environments and associations” as she draws upon the widespread knowledge of her family name and their theatrical ties to continue her performances, using her theatrical inheritance to aid in the cultivation of her public, masculine celebrity (376).

**Family Fame: Charke and Cibber**

The early performances that Charke constructs indicate her awareness of her celebrity as a part of theatrical tradition. She uses the widespread knowledge of her father’s celebrity to help

\textsuperscript{16} She also showcases these multiple identities to show her folly, which enables her to seek audience’s sympathy and also reinforces her connection to her family’s fame as she positions herself as the prodigal daughter attempting to return to her loving father.
her engage the public in her artificial performances and cement her position as the daughter of Colley Cibber. The network of the Cibber family ensures Charke’s early survival as her father provides both financial and social protection through theatrical connections and financial stability. According to Smith, Charke “lavishes praise on [Cibber] as she acknowledges the breadth of his parental love” and ties his indulgence to his duty as a father, noting, “tis every Parent’s Duty to breed their Children with every Advantage their Fortunes will admit” (Charke 25; Smith 87). Through her father’s continued indulgence, Charke accesses the “every Advantage” her parents’ “Fortunes . . . admit” to her, gaining access not only to a liberal education but also her birthright of the eighteenth-century stage (25).

Charke draws upon her parents’ financial stability when her marriage with Richard dissolves, enabling her to utilize her family’s support to survive. She credits her survival to her father, noting that she had received “many an auxiliary Guinea” from Cibber “to purchase herself a new Pair of Horns” (31). Her father’s continued financial support inverts the traditional seduction narrative women encountered. Marrying into a family for more economic stability and opportunity was not uncommon in the seduction narrative. Mary Anne Schofield, a feminist theorist, “women played no part at all” in the seduction narrative (18). Lawrence Stone reinforces the female position in the seduction narrative, noting, “daughters were a serious economic drain on the family finances . . . [but] useful in cementing political connection” (71-3). Belonging to the Cibber network provides access to familial social connections and advantages in theatrical society as evidenced when Charke discusses her husband’s motives for marriage, noting that “he thought it no bad Scheme to endeavor at being Mr. Cibber’s Son-in-Law, who as at that Time a Patentee in Drury-Lane Theatre” to improve his own position in the theater (29). Charke carefully places careful emphasis on Richard’s position as Mr. Cibber’s Son-in-Law
rather than her husband, indicating that the marriage was formed out of interest rather than love and aimed at taking advantage of the Cibber family’s connections rather than the “Passion. . . of real Love” (Charke 29). Even as Charke faces an uncertain future, her father’s continued support provides her with limited protection and guaranteed survival until their estrangement.

The Cibber family’s power in the theatrical world enables Charke to engage the public in her performances. In addition to Charke’s husband later trying to take advantage of Cibber’s influence, Charke’s early performances also capitalize on the family’s theatrical influence, which Charke inherits. In recounting her second performance as a child where she rode upon an ass, Charke states, “I communicated my Design to a small Troop of young Gentle-man and Ladies, whose low Births and adverse States rendered it entirely convenient for them to come into any Scheme Miss Charlotte Cibber (my emphasis) could possible propose” (14). Charke utilizes her family’s prominence in theatrical society to gain the support of the small troop in her scheme. Those in the small troop see potential in the plan that the daughter of Colley Cibber concocts and willingly participate for the possibility of changing their “adverse States,” which results in Charke utilizing the public’s perception of her family’s celebrity to increase her own ability to craft her public persona. Even though her father is later unamused as evidenced by Charke’s characterization of his reaction, “the strong Mixture of Surprise, Pleasure, Pain and Shame in his Countenance,” and her experience of the birch as a result of her parents’ embarrassment, Charke succeeds in using her family’s influence to manipulate her own performance, drawing upon her father’s celebrity to inform her own (14-5).

The Cibber family’s influence additionally provides Charke access to the informal network of social connections that her family cultivated in the theater. Ben-Amos characterizes this informal social network as an apparatus that could be utilized by the heir or other family
members and would often extend into marriage, accessing families shared resources and joined networks to better advantage the families (376). Charke draws upon theatrical connections to inherit her place upon her parents’ stage\textsuperscript{17}, recounting that “Mrs. Thurmond . . . understood that I was designed for the Stage the Season following, request[ing] that I might make my first Appearance on her Night” (31). Shevelow analyzes this incident, observing, “in the spring of 1730, the veteran actress Sarah Thurmond requested that Charlotte be permitted to make her first stage appearance on Mr. Thurmond’s benefit night that April” in the same character that her “sister Elizabeth had briefly played more than two years before” (104). In assuming a role that her sister has previously performed, Charke engages in the theatrical tradition of roles passing from one generation to another while her father oversees her debut (Charke 31; Brockett and Franklin 223). Her father protects his daughter and his family as evidenced when Charke remarks that he intends to keep her name from the “Benefit-Bills,” citing a “prudent concern intend[ing] it to be a Secret, ‘till he had Proof of [his daughter’s] Abilities” to perform (32). According to Shevelow, “Charlotte’s ‘Joy was somewhat dash’d,’ she said, to see herself billed anonymously as ‘a young Gentlewoman” and she immediately set out to subvert her father’s wishes, informing the town that it was she who was to perform the role (104). In keeping his daughter’s name from the bill, Cibber protects his daughter from a not-always-flattering public, attempting to distance Charke’s performance from the Cibber identity in case as Shevelow asserts “his enemies might show up to hiss and catcall her because she was [Colley Cibber’s]

\textsuperscript{17} According to Shevelow, “Theophilus continued to try to help his sister, writing an afterpiece for the occasion called Damon and Daphne, in which Charlotte played the male part of Damon,” which shows that familial support extends beyond the parent-child relationship the Cibbers had with Charke (163).
daughter\(^{18}(104)\). In aiming to keep the Cibber name a secret, Charke’s father protects her from a negative public and the ever-shifting perception of familial celebrity.

No matter the distance between Charke and her father, the actress cannot escape the public’s awareness of her family’s celebrity as her celebrity intersects with her father and siblings’ celebrities on and offstage. Charke’s celebrity becomes hybridized as audiences recognize her performance as a trace of her family’s presence on the stage, which aligns with Engel’s fashioning strategy of ghosting\(^{19}(6-7)\). Ghosting enables actresses to carefully craft their celebrity by drawing on previous experiences, exposures on and offstage in a variety of mediums, which they use to “haunt” the public and reinforce their celebrity with audiences (6). Through ghosting, the traces of the Cibber family’s occupancy of the eighteenth-century stage are able to be recollected by an eighteenth-century audience that brings prior experiences, perceptions, and encounters with the Cibbers and other actresses with them to the theater as the audience recollects and experiences not only her current performance but also the previous performances of those who enacted the character of Mademoiselle prior to Charlotte’s performance. When Charke performs her debut in a role that her sister Elizabeth had previously assumed a few years prior, she blurs her identity and celebrity with that of Elizabeth Cibber as the audiences recollect Elizabeth’s performances at the same time that they experience Charlotte’s debut. Aware of the power of her family’s pervasive fame, Charke demonstrates an awareness of her family’s celebrity haunting her at an early age and uses the advantages of

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\(^{18}\text{Cibber’s reaction to Charke’s debut suggests that inheritance of the family name was not always beneficial (Charke 32).}\)

\(^{19}\text{Ghosting “traces” a celebrity’s “recycling and repeating images” that “haunt” an audience’s memory (Engel 6-7). Engel draws upon Marvin Carlson’s explication that ghosting can be associated with a performer’s body, noting that he states, “the recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience” (6).}\)
ghosting to craft her own persona as evidenced when she convinces the public to participate in her performances, often using the credit of her family’s name to do so (14).

Ultimately, Charke unveils the artificiality of her celebrity and continues to capitalize on her position as Colley Cibber’s daughter, which situates her as a product of inheritance. Despite her father’s estrangement to her, she positions herself as a repentant child and involves her father in her story, which ties Colley Cibber’s identity to Charlotte Charke and links their celebrities in the public eye (10-11). Knowing that her “Readers” are aware of her father and their falling out, she crafts her narrative through the performance of repentant child, outlining her “painful Separation from [her] once tender Father” and situates herself as seeking entry back into the family fold, performing the narrative as a prodigal daughter seeking to return home (10-11)\textsuperscript{20}. Charke aligns herself with the prodigal son or daughter when she states, “I am certain neither my present of future Conduct, shall ever give him Cause to blush at what I should esteem a justifiable and necessary Reconciliation, as ‘tis the absolute Ordination of the Supreme that we should forgive, when the Offender becomes a sincere and hearty Penitent” (11). According to Smith, Charke “turns to print as the medium through which to achieve reconciliation and to affect a reprieve from her reputation as undutiful daughter” (86). While I agree with Smith that Charke seeks reconciliation, turning to print as a medium is a deliberately public move that Charke employs not only to seek her father’s absolution but also to engage the public in her celebrity, connecting her audience with her story as the misunderstood and “REPENTANT CHILD” of Colley Cibber (Charke 11). Within her *Narrative*, Charke takes the audience on a journey through her life where she stands not only to inherit her parents’ love but also the stage. Her inheritance and early education gain her fame, influence, and press, but also serves as

\textsuperscript{20} Smith asserts that Charke in performing the role of repentant child “sanctifies the role of victimized heroine by infusing it with the virtues of Christian piety, especially charity and forgiveness (88).
warning as inheritance, while advantageous to youths on the stage, does not always guarantee success. Phillip Baruth notes that Charke later loses her birthright when the Licensing Act goes into effect (Baruth 25). With her birthright lost, she turns to fashion her celebrity through her pen, a skill that her elite education allowed her to pursue, becoming what Baruth and other critics classify “as an early feminist figure” (53).

**Margaret Woffington: A Case Study of Discovery**

While Charlotte Charke capitalized on her inheritance as a daughter of theater to situate her celebrity in the public consciousness, actresses such as Margaret “Peg” Woffington found the stage through discovery. Within the *Memoirs of the Celebrated Mrs. Woffington*[^21], Woffington was a product of humble beginnings, and after the death of her father found herself a daughter in what Sandra Richards would classify as a “down-at-heel family” where she worked alongside her mother to make ends meet by carrying linen to and from houses (Swan 8; Richards 24). Yet, her early upbringing was not entirely without education, giving her the advantage that she needed to access the stage. According to Nussbaum, “from the beginning, actresses would have been recruited primarily from among those who could read, or at least memorize easily by rote, requiring their possessing a certain basic quickness and education” (37). From the age of five to ten, Woffington’s mother “sent [her] to School, to learn to read of an old Woman in the Neighborhood” until she was needed at her mother’s side to make ends meet (8). With an ability to read and memorize and a “decent, modest Carriage” which “attracted the Notice and Esteem of her Mother’s Employers,” Woffington soon caught the attention of a person with theatrical

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[^21]: Woffington’s *Memoirs* serve as a source of authority on her life; according to the WorldCat record, the text was published in 1760 by J. Swan in London, the account is accepted by early biographers such as Melville and Molloy who both draw from this text to infuse their own accounts of the actress’ life. While there is no definitive proof that Woffington authored this narrative, the account portrays facts of her early life and depicts the eighteenth-century public’s understanding of Woffington’s life.
experience who determined she would be a good fit for performance (8). Persons of theatrical prominence often acquired young women from, John Harold Wilson asserts, “genteel poor women” who seemed naturally talented in the art (10). With her mother unable to adequately support her financially, Woffington soon took to the stage under the direction of Madam Violante who saw the potential in the young girl to make an independent living that no longer placed a burden on her parent. Discovered actresses, like Woffington, lacked parents that could provide early instruction and opportunities for their children on the stage, so these women had to learn the environment of the stage in a similar manner that an apprentice undertook a trade (Franklin and Brockett 219). They studied under masters or stars until the apprentice, if they were able, could assume the position of the master. Woffington found this success as she surpassed Madame Violante’s fame as a success on the eighteenth-century stage in both England and Ireland (Melville 154).

Madame Violante: Peg Woffington & Apprenticeship

Within the Memoir, the narrator positions Woffington’s discovery as a happy accident, which serves to distance the young actress from an identity associated with her “profession’s historic associations with the other, and oldest, public profession for women: prostitution” (Brooks 4). The narrative paints a vivid scene as Woffington is:

Accosted in the Street by M Violante’s Maid, who informed her [that] her Mistress wanted to speak with her. She obey[s] the Message and being shewn in to that Lady, was asked a great many Questions on various Subjects to which she gave such Answers, as confirmed the Querist in the Opinion she had entertained of her and determined her to apply to Mis Woffington for her Consent to her Daughter’s being apprenticed to her (Swan 9).

Melville, in his biography of the actress, describes the account as more intentional as Madame Violante directly discovers Woffington (154). Upon her return home “at the close of an October day,” in 1727, “she had been often seen by the well-known Mademoiselle Violante in the mean
Employment of fetching Water from the Lassey for her Mother’s Use” (Melville 154, Swan 9). Upon seeing the young girl, Madame Violate, a famous eighteenth-century tightrope walker\textsuperscript{22} “who being at that Time Mistress of a Booth in Dame Street, and a Person of no small Penetration” decided she should offer Woffington the position of her apprentice since she “thought she could read in Peggy’s Features, a Mind worth a better Employment. . . determined to have some Discourse with [Woffington], and if [the girl] answered the Expectations she had formed to engage her in her Service as an Apprentice” (Swan 9). Both biographical accounts of Woffington depict the same scene; upon accepting Violante’s offer and attaining her mother’s consent, Woffington becomes her apprentice (Melville 156-7; Swan 9). Madame Violante, upon Woffington’s acceptance of her position as apprentice, assumes a proprietary role over her charge and “could lease or even sell [her] to theater companies” if Woffington proved to be successful (Nussbaum 35).

Established actresses had the ability to assume a proprietary role over their charges as Madame Violante does over Woffington. The ability to profit off young aspiring actresses encouraged stars to be on the lookout for potential understudies as both apprentices and already established performers benefited from the arrangement (Nussbaum 35). The established star benefits from the arrangement as her charge’s success has the potential to not only increase her wealth but also her fame as she becomes famous for discovering a future star. According to Melville’s account, Woffington’s mother “knew the value of money” and understood that Peg would be “earn[ing] good salaries in a short time” under the careful direction of Madame Violante (159). This arrangement not only benefits the star, as evidenced when Woffington

\textsuperscript{22} Lewis Melville classifies Madame Violate as a famous rope “dancer” that was associated with “a great booth in Fownes Court, with a vast glare of lights, where the sounds of fiddles and drums were heard strumming and beating right merry measures, and to which crowds flocked nightly, that they might see such tricks and daring feats as had never before been witnessed in this goodly city” (156).
leaves “her Mother to enter into her new Scene of Life,” but also improves the impoverished mother’s prospects and allows the young charge access to social mobility (10). According to the 1760 memoir, “it was hard to say whether the Mother or Daughter was the most pleased. The former in having a burden taken off her Hands, and with so good a Prospect a View or the latter in enjoying, by Anticipation, the Joys and Pleasures she should daily be” experiencing (10). In undertaking the apprenticeship, both Woffington and her mother experience a higher quality of living.

The apprentice further benefits from their discovery by escaping a life of meager employment such as washing linen (Swan 9). In Woffington’s case, she escaped a life of hardship by being discovered as evidenced in the exchange between Madame Violante and her mother. In the 1760 memoir, readers uncover that Woffington will be leaving home to study theatrical tradition in the passage:

> The good Woman was astonished at what she heard; and it is difficult to say whether her Surprize or Joy was the greatest. She, however, made her Acknowledgements in the best Manner she was able, for the Lady’s Goodness, and thankfully accepted the Proposal—In Conclusion, it was agreed, that the next Day Peggy should be assigned over to M Violante’s Care to reside with her, and be by her instructed in the Dramatic Business, to enable her to appear on the Stage with a becoming Grace (Swan 9).

Leaving home removes Woffington from intense economic hardship as, in assuming Madame Violante’s apprenticeship, she leaves behind her life as the daughter of “a poor washerwoman” and enters into a world of performance where she has the potential to earn a decent living (Melville 159). Woffington’s life transforms with her apprenticeship as she leaves behind carrying water in rags and receives theatrical “Instruction” from an established actress who “buys her ‘rich Cloaths’ and ‘introduce[s] her Friends’ to her, giving the young charge access
to the social network she had cultivated over the years that will later allow her to navigate theatrical politics (159).

While some companies adopted aspiring actresses as charges to profit, the most common form of master-apprenticeship involved the “star actress” or actor-managers teaching “aspiring” young pupils (Nussbaum 44). Once her mother consents to her apprenticeship and Woffington leaves home, “M Violante receive[s] [the] Heroine with open Arms, examin[ing] her more closely than she had done before, and th[inks] she ha[s] infinite Reason to be satisfied with herself for having engaged a young Creature whom she foresaw would prove of vast Service to her and an Ornament to the Stage (Swan 10). In biographer Joseph Molloy’s account (1897), after she is inspected and found favorable, Woffington “become[s] one of Madame’s pupils; and in a little while, attired in long drawers, short jacket, and flat pumps, she learn[s] to dance and skip about the stage, and presently to sing songs” (9). Participating in apprenticeship granted access to a world that trained its actresses in theatrical traditions and trained beginners to learn a large number of roles quickly (Brockett and Franklin 219). According to Brockett and Franklin, stars learned “roles [that] were passed down from one generation to the next, and with them went the traditional interpretation” (219). Woffington, during her apprenticeship, begins to learn this tradition from her discoverer who “give[s] her Instruction [on] how to demean herself” and “engage[s] some of her Company to teach her to dance” (10). In learning from the company and her “master,” Madame Violante, Woffington begins to ascend the ranks in the troupe as she makes “rapid Progress in Improvement than the most Sanguine Hope of her Mistress could presage” (10). This rapid movement shows not only Woffington’s talent but also the teaching

\[23\] Melville will later use portions of Molloy’s account in his record of Woffington’s life; whether Molloy’s account is the most accurate may be a conversation for future scholarship.
ability of her instructors, indicating that the master-apprentice system was an efficient and effective way of teaching a new charge.

Woffington’s theatrical education extends beyond the stage and enables the actress to have, at minimum, the appearance of social mobility between the low and upper-middle classes. As Woffington undertakes these studies, she also learns, according to Molloy, “deportment and elocution” as well as “French,” elevating her education from basic reading and memorization to the minimum traditional middle-class curriculum\(^{24}\). As Woffington moves beyond basic instruction of performance, she begins to learn what Nussbaum calls the “art of social emulation” (44). According to Nussbaum, actresses were also expected to learn how to “mov[e] through the social classes in drama and in life while mastering the etiquette of nobility” (44). In this behavioral training, Woffington gains access to Madame Violante’s social networks and learns how to cross class boundaries both on and off the stage, adjusting her performance to the role and the audience. Davies in his “Life of Garrick” observes that “in Mrs. Day in The Committee, Mrs. Woffington made no scruple to disguise her beautiful countenance, by drawing on it the lines of deformity and the wrinkles of old age, and to put on the tawdry habiliments and vulgar manners of an old hypocritical city vixen.” In throwing herself into the role and “effacing” her own identity for that of the character, Woffington adjusts her performance to the audience. The audience, in recognition of her achievement of technique and in light of the “Justness of her Elocution, the Grace of her Action, and the fine Figure she exhibit[s]” erupt into applause and “mark her as a future fine Actress,” resulting in a young actress that “delight[s]” those in

\(^{24}\) I am defining “traditional middle-class curriculum as the curriculum for women that Tuberville outlines and as detailed in the case study of Charlotte Charke. As aforementioned, women were trained in dancing and French as well as deportment. While Woffington does not have the ability to study at a school, Madame Violante and the company serve as an institution of theatrical education, almost akin to a governess taking on a charge in a home environment.
management who soon offer her more roles due to the positive reception (Roach 59; Melville 161). Woffington’s performances and receptions demonstrate her success in the apprentice system and begin to shape her public celebrity as her fame grows, which leads to her rise out of the lower class as she steadily gains popularity and more financial independence.

Even with Woffington’s success in her education as an apprentice, Madame Violante carefully assists the young actress in crafting her celebrity before presenting her with more opportunities upon the stage. While the actress is in apprenticeship, Woffington does not have control over what roles she will enter into. Her celebrity becomes shaped by Madame Violante’s early decision to cast her in certain theatrical roles. According to Woffington’s biography,

Madam Violante was for a long Time doubtful what Character our Heroine should first personate. She knew she was equal to many, yet, as she was sensible that the first setting off, in a great Measure, influences the future Conduct and Reception the Public gives a young Actress on her first Appearance, either inspires or intimidates her after Behaviour, she was determined she should appear in a Character to which her Youth and Abilities would be peculiarly suited (Swan 11).

In taking a long time to consider the role Woffington would first perform, Madame Violante assumes responsibility for placing her charge in the industry. She understands that the first performance “influences the future Conduct and Reception the Public gives,” which makes the first role that Woffington assumes a high-stakes endeavor as her future celebrity rests upon its success (11). Therefore, Madame Violante uses both her experience in the trade and “Time” to carefully consider where to place her apprentice, setting her young charge for the “greatest Advantage” possible “to [her] admiring Audience” (11). After a long deliberation over the role and “several rehearsals” where Woffington can prove her skill, Madame Violante agrees to place Woffington as Polly in *The Beggar’s Opera* (12). In best positioning her charge, Madame Violante makes Woffington’s success as an actress possible and showcases the skills of an excellent stage tutor that seeks to elevate her star to the best of her ability and increase her fame.
by catering to the future star’s strengths and distancing the apprentice from any weakness that might lead to a negative celebrity.

**Situating Woffington as an Actress of Trade**

Madame Violante guides her charge through the ranks of the company, which increases Woffington’s success and opens more opportunities for the young actress upon the stage. Before their debut, according to Brockett and Franklin, a beginning actor or actress “played an enormous number of small roles each season and eventually discovered the types for which they were best suited,” which allowed the actress to play roles that strengthened her persona (219). Woffington, in her early days, does just this as she explores training opportunities within the company before her movement into leading roles. Melville observes that in her early days of training, Woffington “often had to dance between the acts, and was occasionally given elderly parts, such as Mrs. Peachum in *The Beggar’s Opera* and Mother Midnight in Farquhar’s *The Twin Rovials,*” which was “excellent training for a novice” (161). During this initial training, Woffington shows an ability to devote herself to the art, which is well-received and provides her with “constant employ[ment]” (161). Her willingness to adapt herself to the roles becomes evident by 1749, “when she could choose her part, or at least reject any that did not appeal to her” (161). Yet, Woffington does not reject the elderly part of Veturia in Thomson’s *Coriolanus* even though her success on the stage had allowed her to climb the theatrical ranks.

Woffington’s success showcases the tiers of the apprentice system, which she was able to ascend from a “general utility” player to a “player of leading roles” by the completion of her apprenticeship. As aforementioned, Brockett and Franklin outline that actresses participated in a theatrical system that “four clearly distinguishable ranks”: “(1) players of leading roles, (2) players of secondary roles, (3) players of third-line parts, and (4) general utility performers”
During the beginning of her apprenticeship in training as a novice, Woffington assumed the roles provided by those practicing general utility positions, taking the roles of the elderly and dancing (Melville 161). But by the end of her apprenticeship, Woffington, now approaching age 11, had assumed the position of “the chief Support of Violante’s House” and “now performed the highest of Characters . . . at [a] Time that other [young women] scare think of appearing on the Stage” (15). As Woffington’s skills increased, so did her salary. Now, at the highest level attainable in the theatrical company as a player of leading roles, Woffington’s success garnered her “a high Sum” for a salary, “thirty shillings a week” (15). As her success and salary increased, Woffington gained more independence on the theatrical scene, leaving Madame Violante’s residence and taking “lodgings for herself” and her “companion,” Bob (15).

Woffington’s position as the performer of leading roles enables her to cultivate an ambition that is unavailable to those under apprenticeship. Like Charke, she faces a choice once she assumes a lover of whether or not to marry (19). However, Woffington values her theatrical success above the traditional narrative for women, noting, “the thoughts of the plaudits of an admiring audience” as well as “the praises bestowed on her beauty and her playing by judicious critics” called her to keep performing even after she had the ability to leave the stage for the life as a wife (19). According to Woffington, “after weighing Love and Frame, Gratitude and Desire in a Scale, she found her Desire and Love of Fame preponderated, and made the others kick the Beam” (19). In dedicating her life to the stage, Woffington completes the apprenticeship system, taking her celebrity into her own hands and uncovering ambition, which leads to “her Resolution of appearing on the English Stage (19).

Charlotte Charke did not make her debut until she was in her teens despite her access to earlier opportunities for independent performance; her parents supported her public performances but were careful about crafting her celebrity on the stage, possibly desiring to protect their daughter (Charke 104).
As she finds success on the stage, Woffington transitions from an apprentice to a master, forging her own social network by cultivating theatrical connections. Her Memoirs recount, “being confirmed in her Resolution, our Heroine one Morning early, waited on the Manager of Covent-Garden Theatre with an Intention of offering her Service” (19). Despite her intention, the narrative communicates this transition from apprenticeship to master requires determination and firm resolve, noting that “how many Visits she had paid before admitted to the Theatrical Monarch [she] know[s] not, but believe they were nineteen” before she was finally afforded a visit” (19). In the earliest account, she uses her name “WOFFINGTON” to finally attain the visit with what she refers to as the “Stage-crowned Monarch26” and petitions him to take her on, which he does (Swan 20). Even if Woffington did not use her name to gain entry into the manager’s office in actuality, the memoir’s account authorizes the actress to do so and situates her as a powerful force in the public consciousness as she gains entry both to the Irish and British stage.

Despite her evident successes, Woffington still faces difficulty due to her lack of education, highlighting the cultural divide between Irish and English performance. In the account, Rich states, “You took on the Irish Stage, you are not learned enough for mine. Learning is a fine Thing, and I have heard you have it not, yet, perhaps, with some of my Help in private, you may do very well” (20). While Woffington received training from Madame Violante and has success on the Irish stage, according to Rich, she is ill-equipped to navigate the English stage and must undergo more theatrical education to succeed. Rich’s proposal aligns with the apprenticeship that Woffington had just completed under Madame Violante. According to

26The stage-manager was a lover of cats: “The Stage-crowned Monarch was reclined, on a Couch, with one Leg lolling over the other, his left Hand holding a Play-Book, and his right, a China Cup, out of which he was sipping some Tea. Round him, upon him, and about him, were seven and twenty Cats of different Sizes, Ages, and Complexions” (20).
Nussbaum, “early modern apprentices in the craft of acting were usually tutored by individual[s]” who would instruct them in the theatrical traditions of the stage (35). In acquiescing Woffington’s request to join the English stage, Rich agrees to be her individual instructor as evidenced by the line, “with some of my Help in private, you may do very well,” which enables Woffington to learn the traditions of the English stage as well as the Irish (20).

Even while receiving instruction to perform on the English stage, Woffington’s celebrity transcends the cultural divide between Britain and Ireland through her public celebrity. Within the Memoirs, Woffington visits Mr. Rich at Breakfast and he responds, “I have heard of you, Madam. . . and tho’ I am in no great Want of Hands, yet as you are so charming a Figure, and so handsome a Person, I would oblige you for all that” (20). In recognizing her name, Mr. Rich highlights Woffington’s legitimacy as an actress as he indicates how far her popularity as an actress has traveled since her name has reached the English stage even though she is an Irish performer (20). He agrees to take her on, expanding not only Woffington’s celebrity further but also the social network she can claim on and offstage. Upon the London stage, Woffington, at first, has neutral performances; she is not looked upon as a great actress and, instead, must ascend the ranks once again in a different sociopolitical climate. However, once she performs “the Character of Sir Harry Wildair,” her celebrity upon the English stage transforms and she becomes known as an “excellent Actress” that had a unique “manner of playing that Character,” which “was so different from that of anyone who had before appeared in it” that she drove both sexes mad—the “male part of the audience were all running mad for her . . . [and] the females were equally well pleased with her acting as the Men were, but could not persuade themselves that she was a Woman that acted the character” (22). In performing Sir Harry Wildair, Woffington blurs the binary between male-and-female and begins to cultivate a cross-dressing
image that informs her celebrity upon the stage and ensures her future fame as she gains recognition for her success in the breeches role.

**Breaking Gendered Boundaries via Ghosting & Tradition**

Unlike Charke who ghosts her audience by drawing upon the enduring legacy of her family’s fame and reinforcing her identity as a daughter of the theater by drawing attention to her “linked legitimacy,” Woffington uses portraiture to reinforce and “haunt” her audience with her celebrity. Throughout various portraits, the image of her cross-dressing costume and the theatrical, masculine gesture of “the right hand inside the waistcoat” repeats to remind her audience of her breeches role and the identity she assumes on stage. Portraiture of her dressed as a man informs her celebrity and reinforces her abilities as an actress. Her images as a beautiful actress and Sir Harry merge and her celebrity—now fused with both masculine and feminine personas—remains blended as long as audiences can remember her in those roles, allowing her to ghost her audience’s memory.

**FIGURE 1.** Hogarth. Margaret (“Peg”) Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair in “The Constant Couple. 1740.”

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While dressed as a man in Hogarth’s “nearly three-quarter length portrait” 28 (1740), pictured above, Woffington exudes a persona that is typically inaccessible to women as she stands erect with no cleavage exposed, no folded hands, and no accessories. Unlike her other portraits as a female actress in which her breasts are partially exposed, large hoop skirts are worn, and feminine accessories adorn her, this image depicts no femininization, portraying only masculine qualities. The hybridization of both sexes becomes evident through her signed depiction of the image, which blends her feminine identity with her masculine role.

The portrayal of Woffington as man and Woffington as embodied authority becomes complicated when she deconstructs the artificiality of the portrait and undermines the authority and artistic freedom of the painter by claiming ownership of the image and acknowledging its fiction, which ties her to her performance and enhances her celebrity. She pens, “I play the part of . . . Harry Wildair tonight” and then signs her name. With her signature, Woffington authorizes the portrait as part of her identity while simultaneously calling attention to its fiction; she writes that she plays “tonight,” which indicates that Harry Wildair is a fictional character that she assumes; however, in crafting this image, Woffington ensures that the audience blends her identity as an actress with Wildair’s as they visualize Woffington as Wildair. In functioning as both man and woman, Woffington crafts a hybridized image that adds a consumptive, tantalizing element to her celebrity, especially as both sexes desire her. James Quin’s memoirs read, “Everyone who remembers her must recollect that she performed Sir Harry Wildair . . . far superior to any actor of her time . . . She had besides dispossessed herself of that awkward stiffness and effeminacy which so common attend the fair sex in breeches” (67). Readers of Quin

28 This portrait can be located in the University of Illinois Theatrical Print collection.
realize that Woffington successfully “disposed herself of that awkward stiffness and effeminacy which so common attend the fair sex in breeches,” enabling her the opposite sex (Quin 67).

By marketing herself as a commodity through her signature and statement\(^{29}\), Woffington further highlights the fact that she’s playing the role “tonight,” which encourages audiences to attend her future performance. In encouraging her fans to attend her performance, she takes an active role in marketing her celebrity, indicating the power of an actress who straddles and blur boundaries of the sexes and the private and public spheres as she can continue to increase her celebrity’s economy. According to Nora Nachumi, “throughout the century, [actresses] embodied different and more complex pictures of female nature. . . Actresses seemed all too aware of their own desires . . . and their material success also challenged a sexual economy that made women men’s property” (11-2). Woffington’s control over her celebrity and management of her own economy, as evidenced by her marketing techniques, suggests that she inhabits what Smith refers to as “a peerless” position. Her celebrity image exists between the cultural scripts of femininity and masculinity that gender difference maintains and she transgresses this boundary, becoming a hybridized being of both sexes, which makes her a desirable commodity to both men and woman but places her outside of her audience’s reach (103).

\(^{29}\) Hogarth painted the portrait, so he influenced Woffington’s portrayal and authorized her image; Woffington’s authority stems from her writing.
Woffington continues to use the strategy of ghosting in fashioning celebrity in the later portraiture of her clad in breeches (1746), which falls into Nussbaum’s third category of cross-dressing: donning male clothing “while remaining openly female” (196). Described as a “whole-length portrait” of a woman “standing in officer’s uniform” entitled “The Female Volunteer; or an Attempt to make our Men STAND,” the image of Woffington cross-dressing as a female volunteer soldier recycles the common elements of male dress: waistcoat, breeches, and men’s shoes. However, unlike Sir Harry Wildair’s depiction, the audience recognizes that the depiction is of a woman playing a man, which creates hybridized image of a woman performing male qualities while retaining varying degrees of femininity. To understand how Figure 2 functions as a different type of cross-dressing, a brief comparison to Figure 1 will be beneficial. In Figure 1, Woffington wears a waistcoat that hides the shape of her body. The tightly fitting garments, rather than creating a sexualized image of Woffington, streamline her body’s shape and disguise

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30 M. Moore. “Margaret (Peg) Woffington as the Female Volunteer,” 1746, Portraits of Actors, 1720-1920, University of Illinois Library, University of Illinois Print Collection, https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/87e67460-4e7d-0134-1db1-0050569601ca-4.
any feminine curves, which makes her appear like a true man. This denial of feminine attributes casts Woffington’s presence as austere and masculine, which creates a believable persona as a man. Nachumi observes that “whatever the actress did in performance was inevitably associated with her character offstage . . . her conduct offstage invariably informs her onstage personae” (23). In assuming the role of an “openly female” volunteer, Woffington renegotiates her position between the cultural scripts of femininity and masculinity as she displays more feminine traits than masculine despite her cross-dressing attire and the public perceives her as female.

Woffington’s strategic and deliberate actions and movements during performances and within portraiture tie her gestures to the theatrical tradition she experienced during her apprenticeship. According to Russ McDonald, “performers were conscious of the need to present an imitation of nature, to bring out a character’s ‘natural’ and distinctive qualities” (24). These conventions were, McDonald continues, “fairly strict” (24). Actresses learned “gestures [that] were codified and affixed to particular emotions” (24). These gestures were handed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, tutor to apprentice, and, as a result, the conventions of the stage began to become recognizable to their audience as actresses performed them, which allowed certain gestures to transcend generations as more and more actresses mastered the conventions of their craft (24). By continuously cultivating an awareness of her series of celebrity images and the identities than follow her through her repeated gestures and depictions in portraiture, Woffington maintains her influence and limited agency in society by meeting “expectations . . . based on both familiar conventions of eighteenth-century portraiture

Nachumi argues that “actresses offered women a way to evade the surveillance that disciplined their conduct” (12). For example, actresses challenged the idea that women were “modest” (actresses could assume fictional roles), needed a man to support them (“actress’s material success challenged a sexual economy”), and embodied the “feminine ideal” (actresses had the power to challenge “dominant images of the ideal” through representations on the stage) (12-13).
and on the actress’ appearances on and off stage” and memorializing her performances in the 
minds of her audience (Engel 7).

Woffington deliberately sexualizes her image in her cross-dressing episode in the 
“Female Volunteer” portrait (1746), appearing feminine despite her breeches; while she wears 
the common elements of cross-dress, her vest, hat, and coat have numerous ruffles and extend 
outward from her body like a petticoat. Her supposedly masculine soldier’s hat also appears to 
have material resembling white lace ruffles framing the edges. The hat she wears in the portrait 
echoes the hat she wore when she played the character of Mrs. Ford in 1745, a full year before 
she donned the costume for her role as a female soldier.

Woffington’s hats function as trace images, appearing throughout her acting career as she 
transitions from female roles to masculine and back to feminine, acting as accessories both on 
and offstage, in private and public atmospheres, both in public dress and theatrical costuming.

32 Faber Jr, John. “Peg Woffington (‘Mrs. Margaret Woffington in the character of Mrs. Ford in the Merry Wives of Windsor,” National Portrait Gallery, Collection NPG D36313, 
33 M. Moore. “Margaret (Peg) Woffington as the Female Volunteer,” 1746, Portraits of Actors, 1720-1920, 
University of Illinois Library, University of Illinois Print Collection, 
https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/87e67460-4e7d-0134-1db1-0050569601ca-4.
The hats, while not exact replicas, serve as echoes, particularly for audiences remembering Woffington in 1744, 1745, and 1753. The Mrs. Ford hat and the Volunteer Female's hat, while facing opposite directions, have a similar triangular shape that angles the brim away from the head. Woffington’s 1753 hat also echoes the hat she wore as Mrs. Ford in its shape and downward slope. The volunteer female's hat has a similar white trim to Woffington’s hat that she wore while identifying as Mrs. Ford. In the soldier’s hat, the white trim may be lace and is positioned on the top of the hat (Figure 4) whereas in the depiction of Woffington as Mrs. Ford, the lace is located beneath the hat and has more detail as viewers can see the individual lace panels. While these hats are not exact replicas of one another, the triangular shape of the hat might have echoed in the mind of her audience as these depictions were only a year apart and her audience may have begun to associate the hats with Woffington’s series of performances.

While I cannot be sure that Woffington’s audience recognized the echoes of her triangular hats that represented her celebrity to the public, critics such as Gill Perry have studied how actress’ ghosting affects her audience as they experience the actress’ images in public. According to Perry, portraits acted as points of connection for audience members as they would attend exhibits such as “the Royal Academy” and “compare anecdotal and observed knowledge with the images on the wall” (19). Woffington demonstrates the awareness of her audience’s reception of her performances. In order to better appeal to both sexes and navigate the particular demands placed on her celebrity in her undertaking of a new role, Woffington appears to assume a more tantalizing approach in the Volunteer Female depiction. Her portrait uses her sex appeal as a woman to craft an image that resonates with her male audience who might feel threatened by

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35 According to Lisa Coppin, images stick with audiences in “subtle, often unconscious ways” (Conclusion). Audiences may not have been consciously aware of the repeating image of Woffington in these hats, but may have unconsciously recognized her with this accessory.
a successfully masquerading male who is actually a woman. In *The History of the Theatres of London and Dublin From the Year 1730 to the Present Time*, Benjamin Victor outlines such “nervousness” surrounding the ambiguities of sexuality surrounding cross-dressing in his review of Woffington as Wildair. In his statement, “the Actress in Question . . . had Beauty, Shape, Wit, and Vivacity . . . capable of any Undertaking in the Province of Comedy, nay of deceiving, and warming into Passion, any of her own Sex, if she had been unknown, and introduced as a young Baronet just returned from his Travels” (Straub 132). Victor worries that Woffington might have been able to successfully masquerade, assume the position of male, and seduce members of her own sex. Woffington sets this “threat[ening]” ambiguity at ease and is a desirable object with false power in the “Female Volunteer” as the men in her audience know that she cannot disguise her femininity so successfully in this role that she could masquerade as a male without detection, diminishing her threat of hybridization and reemphasizing her qualities as a female actress (132).

The text in the bottom half of the portrait further acts as a guideline for how the public is to situate Woffington’s image in relation the epilogue attached to the image that appeared in M. Moore’s *Pater-noster-Row* during 1746 and directs attention to the actress playing a part of a man. The lines, “Our Men retreat! Before a Scrub Banditti! Who fearce could fright the Buff-Coats of the City!—Well, if ‘tis so, and that our *Men* can’t *Stand*, ‘Tis Time we *Women* take the *Thing* in *Hand*, Thus in my *Country’s* Cause I now appear, a bold, smart, *Kevenbulle’d Volunteer,*” place Woffington in the position of female soldier who can stand in place of a man, giving her a role of authority and power that is often bequeathed to men, and reminds her audience of her role as Harry Wildair as she assumes male authority through yet another masculine trace (Moore).
However, the next few lines undo this androgenized movement by reaffirming the separateness of the sexes and shaming men into becoming soldiers. The epilogue continues, calling women to action and giving them power in the line, “Jesting apart—We Women have strong Reason, to stop the progress of this Popish Treason” (Moore). In giving women the power to stop men’s cowardice as they refuse to serve their country, “this Popish Treason,” the female volunteer’s identity and contribution becomes associated with British nationalism and the women serve to galvanize the men into serving, reaffirming the femininity and their limitations in the public realm (Moore). This connection between women and nationalism becomes further reinforced when Woffington’s image becomes associated with the line, “For sure when Female Liberty’s at Stake, All Women ought to bustle for its Sake” (Moore). The use of the world “bustle” complicates the straightforwardness of Woffington’s masquerade as a male soldier that becomes obviously female and her performance threatens cowards and calls British men to arms. The diction choice of “bustle” reminds the audience of the duality of Woffington’s celebrity as she embodies both the male soldier’s role and the domestic woman’s role in war; her blurring of lines can also be associated with a fluidity in performance, an indication that she has finally achieved success on the stage as she continues to blur the bisected spheres governing mid-eighteenth-century gender roles and reinforcing her celebrity as one that functions as the female androgen both on and offstage.

While Woffington succeeds in her temporary access of the masculine realm through her performances and cultivates both masculine and feminine images successfully, the same access cannot be experienced by her female audience, which indicates the limitation of the actress’ power. She cannot overwrite governing cultural codes that separate the sexes and limit her female audience primarily to the domestic sphere; the actress can only temporarily evade them
via performance and subversion (Gissinger 254). For the members of her sex within her audience listening to her performance as a female volunteer soldier, she reads the lines, “In Freedom’s Cause, ye Patriot-Fair, aside, exert the sacred Influence of your Eyes, On valiant Merit design alone to smile, and vindicate the Glory of our life; to no base Coward prostitute your Charms, Disband the Lover who deserts his Arms: so shall you fire each Hero to his Duty, And British Right be fav’d by British beauty” (Moore). Her deliverance of these words, in the costume of a transgressive persona: a woman in man’s clothing, serves to shame the male soldiers into serving their countries as she cannot assume the identity of a soldier fully and reminds the population that the men go to war to protect their nation and family. Further, her statement equates defending British nationalism with possessing British beauty, which highlights Woffington’s ability to assume both Irish and British success as her celebrity “becomes an ornament to both the English and Irish stage,” crossing cultural boundaries as well as those that separate the sexes and showcasing the actress’ power in self-fashioning celebrity (Nussbaum 199).

Charke & Woffington: Additional Insights of Contemporaries

While Charke and Woffington encountered the stage through different methodologies, both women were trained in theatrical tradition, learning gestures, movements, and “social emulation” from more experienced tutors (Nussbaum 44). Charke learned more intensely and thoroughly than Woffington did, having access to an elite education and theatrical parents, which gave her an early advantage on the stage (31). Woffington found her education through

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36 Gissinger explicates the masquerade as a subversive technique, noting, “a mask provides a metaphysical distance from the self, allowing those in costume to deny responsibility for liberalism taken while detached from their day-to-day roles” (254). Actresses use the mask to enter “a forum in which the strict moral codes of English society could, for a moment, be shattered, which accounts for the masquerade’s danger and its appeal” (Gissinger 254).

37 While Woffington represents British beauty, Nussbaum discusses her Irish heritage and observes that her “painstaking self-instruction” in English manners enabled her to pass as an elite English woman (199).
apprenticeship with Madame Violante, brief instruction from Mr. Rich, and intense self-study once she had ascended the ranks that she used to manipulate her public celebrity (11, 20). Despite their differences in theatrical educations, both actresses found success upon the stage and were coached by more experienced players in English manners and gestures.

Education was at the forefront of success on the stage. While Charke had the benefit of early education, Woffington too learned through a similar system but lacked Charke’s liberal, “masculine” education as she did not learn multiple languages (Turberville 161). Both women were trained by players with more experience who coached them in low-stakes performances and enabled them to explore roles that suited their nature. Madame Violante oversaw Woffington’s education and early performance (Swan 7-9). Charke was closely governed by her father, Colley Cibber, who made sure that his daughter had the best advantage possible that he could give her (Charke 31-4).

Both Charke and Woffington had access to informal social networks throughout the theatrical world that they gained through a more experienced stage tutor. While Madame Violante provided Woffington with access to her friends within the company (Swan 9), Charke inherited a larger network through her theatrical parents who in their day had formed and cultivated networks over generations (Charke 31). Charke also had the additional benefit of being able to rely upon siblings and her father’s authority upon the stage, making reentry easier for her as her father encouraged one of her previous managers to reaccept her (36-7). Once Woffington found success, she used her popularity to carry her celebrity and charmed her

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38 Woffington found considerably more success on the stage than Charlotte Charke who lived the life as an outcast despite her early initial advantage.

39 Charke apologizes for her “revenge” upon Mr. Fleetwood, who “at [her] Father’s Request, restored [her] to [her] Former Station. She soon left Fleetwood’s employ for a second time (36-7).
audiences to gain more social connections as she did not have the luxury of an inherited network but used Violante’s tutelage to spearhead her own success (Swan 9).

Charke and Woffington were steeped in theatrical tradition, entering into a more standardized, tiered system where they then ascended the ranks as evidenced by their debuts and subsequent exploration of roles. Both actresses show careful, independent study of their performances; Charke constantly reads her audience from early childhood to adulthood, crafting her persona to those that witnessed and participated in her performances (14). Like Charke, Woffington also demonstrates a careful study and awareness of her audience, crafting her persona to evoke the maximum amount of engagement from the public and using more than one medium to cultivate her celebrity as well as reinforce her existing celebrity upon the public (Nussbaum 199, Molloy 63). Charke uses the power of “linked legitimacy” to reinforce her celebrity upon her audience, tying her identity as a performer with the ghosts of her family’s performances (Woolf 41). She frequently uses her inherited fame through her family’s name to evoke audience interest and sympathy.

Through inheritance and discovery, actresses gained entry to a theatrical world of tradition where “natural” imitation was encouraged and the overall theatrical experience was part of a large tradition where actors and actresses passed roles from one to the next, teaching each new generation the ways of the old (McDonald 24; Brockett and Franklin 219). Both actresses had access to theatrical tutelage and demonstrate mastery of codified gestures in their performances, becoming popular in breeches roles and using their respective talents to cultivate their celebrities with the public and garner favor (Woffington 9, Charke 25).

However, Charke failed to sustain public and private favor, losing touch with her eighteenth-century audience and becoming estranged from her family (Nussbaum “Afterword”
According to Nussbaum, Charke “created difficulties for herself at Drury Lane,” coming onto “hard times” and even falling under threat of going to debtor’s prison (237). Under threat of becoming “a vagrant,” an arrestable offense under the Licensing Act of 1737, Charke fails to earn a living on the stage even as she turned to provincial theater (237). Instead, after losing her inheritance and place as Colley Cibber’s daughter, she turns to literature, using her Narrative to appease the public and access what Nussbaum classifies as a “commercial system that would trade her misfortunes” for “her own economic advantage” (237). While Charke ultimately lost her position on the stage, Woffington continued to cultivate her success throughout her career. After her extremely successful portrayals in roles such as Henry Wildair, she gains entry to Covent Garden and becomes “Garrick’s leading lady in London and Dublin from 1742-48” until illness caused her “to retire in 1757” (“Woffington, Peg”). She remained in the public consciousness as a player “best suited for comedy” with qualities of “grace and vivacity” (“Woffington, Peg”). Her celebrity on and offstage carried well into the future, inspiring plays and novels based upon her life (“Woffington, Peg”).

**Mary Robinson: A Case of Discovery & Intellectualism**

By the end of the eighteenth-century, while actresses continued to find their way to the stage through inheritance and discovery, movement toward a new mode of education began to emerge that emphasized a woman’s ability to cultivate her own celebrity through careful self-construction and use of public perception. In 1779, famous young actress Mary Darby Robinson stars in the role Perdita; after a successful performance, the royal family bows to the performers

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40 According to Nussbaum, Cibber displays both “emotional and economic . . . power over [his] daughter” and cuts her off in the letter: “The stange career which you have run for some years (a career not always unmarked by evil” debars my affording you that succor which otherwise would naturally have been extended to you as my daughter. I must refuse therefore—with this advice—try Theophilus. Yours, in sorrow, Colley Cibber,” which is located in the Entoven Collection at the British Theater museum (238).
and the Prince of Wales catches Robinson’s eye and inclines his head a second time, causing
Robinson to blush in gratitude (Robinson 157). Robinson’s celebrity transcends the boundaries
of the stage as her career enabled her to access the most public and prominent of spheres. She
cultivates her celebrity by manipulating public perception and using her masculine education to
not only perfect her performance but also establish a successful literary career that further
enhances her famous persona, both as actress and authoress. Like Woffington, Mary Robinson
also found the stage through discovery, but she also had the added benefit of masculine
education as Charlotte Charke did, demonstrating that these categories between educational
modes are fluid. Her access to a liberal education enabled her to gain fame in both theatrical and
literary circles, which she later used to cultivate her celebrity as she performed in multiple
mediums, transgressing private and public boundaries.

A Masculine Education

In her Memoirs, Robinson discusses her formative education that provided the early
skills necessary for entering into the theatrical trade and the literary profession, which gave her
an advantage that the majority of discovered actresses did not have as she, like the daughter of
Colley Cibber, had the opportunity of learning with an elite, masculine curriculum. According to
Robinson, after the desertion by her father, the children were sent to “a school at Chelsea”
where she studied under “one of the most extraordinary women that ever graced, or disgraced,
society” (22). Robinson studied under Meribah Lorrington, the product of a masculine

41 Robinson self-authored her memoirs and used her narrative to situate her celebrity as well as teach the public about an actress’ life.
42 Like Peg Woffington, Robinson came to her fortune from a background of necessity as her father abandoned the family and lost his fortune, leaving his wife and his children behind in England for a mistress in America (Robinson 20).
43 According to Linda Peterson, Robinson “depicts herself as Lorrington’s protégé” and her closeness to her tutor depicts the relationship between female instructor and student when both were dedicated to intellectual pursuits, enabling her to become “train[ed] in classical languages and modern subjects [that] women so rarely received,” which allowed her to create “her first literary productions” (39-40). However, Robinson’s later encounter with
education. She classifies her instructor as “the most extensively accomplished female that [she] ever remember[s] to have met with; her mental powers were no less capable of cultivation than superiorly cultivated” (22-23). Lorrington’s extensive accomplishments stemmed from an elite upbringing. She was the daughter of “the master of an academy at Earl’s Court” who after becoming a widow “resolved” to “giv[e]” his daughter “a masculine education” (22). Like Charke, Robinson was able to expand her knowledge through a master of languages as Lorrington “was [the] mistress of the Latin, French, and Italian languages” and she instructed Robinson in these skills (Robinson 22). Lorrington was also trained in “classical knowledge” and exhibited not only a propensity for the sciences as not only “was said to be a perfect arithmetician and astronomer” but also “possessed the art of painting on silk,” enabling her to give her pupil a well-rounded education that encompassed both the masculine and feminine spheres (22). This early education enabled Robinson to present herself as an intellectual equal to men and gave credence to her literary career as she was able to draw upon her elite education. Paula Byrne asserts “the classical education” Robinson receives “demand[ed] a respect that was not often granted to female authors” and cites “an especially striking breadth of classical allusion in her feminist treatise A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination” as evidence of Lorrington’s influence on Robinson’s later literary celebrity (12).

Lorrington’s mentorship of Robinson went beyond the classroom, allowing her to develop intellectual curiosity that could be sustained without artifice as Robinson was formally Lorrington positions her as an “other[ed] woman” as Lorrington has “given over to drink” and is “completely disfigured” (39-40). The instructor’s misery leads readers to recognize Lorrington as an “embody[ment of] the negative effects of a masculine education, the loss of feminine virtues, and even female form,” which, according to Peterson may suggest the message that “coming to authorship the masculine way may be a dangerous, ultimately self-annihilating course of action” (40).

44 Robinson would later use her education to develop her literary celebrity as she draws upon her masculine education during her literary career.

45 Unlike Charke, Robinson had more formalized instruction as her tutor allowed her to pursue intellectual pursuits even once she had acquired more than the necessary skillset for a gentlewoman.
trained and encouraged in her intellectual pursuits by her tutors rather than supported by her parents’ financial support. According to Linda Peterson, “in the early pages of her Memoirs, Mary Robinson similarly stresses her superior literary education . . . [and] “depicts herself as Lorrington’s protégé” when she states “All I ever learned I acquired from that woman” (39). Robinson’s achievement, Peterson continues, sets her apart from other female authors. The acquirement of “classical knowledge” through Lorrington gave Robinson an advantage in the literary world as Nigel Cross explicates when he observes that “utterly inadequate education” left female writers at a large disadvantage compared to male writers (164-8). Robinson’s education allows her to transcend this hurdle as, Peterson asserts, the young actress’ “masculine education”—that is, the training in classical languages and modern subjects women so rarely received—fulfills a prerequisite for writing poetry and indeed, leads her to her first literary productions, her ‘writing verses’ and ‘composes rebuses’” (Peterson 39; Robinson 23). Not only did Lorrington’s education teach Robinson how to write her first attempts at poetry, the curriculum also provided Robinson the early education necessary for success on the stage.

Like Charke, Robinson, after experiencing a masculine education, decides to dedicate her life to intellectual pursuits. According to Robinson in her Memoirs, she “applied rigidly to study, and acquired a taste for books, which has never, from that time, deserted [her]’ (23). Her love of reading gave her the opportunity to ascend the stage as she began to hone her literary abilities with Lorrington as evidenced when her teacher “frequently read to [her] after school hours” and then had Robinson read “to her” as well, which enabled her to practice her elocution and literacy—two key skills needed in theatrical apprenticeship (24). In addition to practicing her performative skills, Robinson’s early masculine education also afforded her the ability to practice her composition skills. She “indulged [her] fancy in writing verses, or composing
rebuses, and [her] governess never failed to applaud the juvenile compositions [she] presented to her,” which would be later “printed in a small volume shortly after [Robinson’s] marriage (24). This early exposure, “a year and two months with Mrs. Lorrington, enables Robinson to hone her literary talents as well as her performative skills that were essential in her discovery as an actress of great theatrical talent (24).

Robinson highlights the intensity with which she studied under Lorrington when she describes her early education at the academy, which prepares her for the rigor of theatrical apprenticeship. She recollects:

In those hours when her senses were not intoxicated, [Lorrington] would delight in the task of instructing me. She had only five or six pupils, and it was my lot to be her particular favourite. She always, out of school, called me her little friend, and made no scruple of conversing with me (sometimes half the night, for I slept in her chamber), on domestic and confidential affairs. I felt for her a very sincere affection, and I listened with peculiar attention to all the lessons she inculcated (22).

Robinson studies as Lorrington’s star pupil, which permits her early access to the structure of an apprenticeship as she works consistently with her tutor throughout the day and “sometimes half the night” and she discusses both “domestic and confidential affairs” with her mentor (22). Robinson’s willingness to study and Lorrington’s willingness to undertake Robinson, becoming what Engel describes as her “constant companion,” mirrors the structure of the theatrical educational system where a master undertakes an apprentice to teach (86). During her time under Lorrington’s instruction, Robinson proves to be a willing and competent pupil, “listen[ing] with peculiar attention to all the lessons she inculcated” and later uses these teachings to further develop her own celebrity with her stage tutor (22).

Before embarking into a life of performance after receiving instruction from Lorrington, Robinson assumed the position of an educator, instructing young women in the English
language, which gave her further mastery of the language and further provided her with an opportunity to practice elocution. According to Robinson, her mother viewed their family as “fatherless” and set out “to support them . . . by honorable means” (24). She found a house at Little Chelsea and converted it into a “ladies’ boarding-school” where Robinson found a position as an instructor of the “English language” at her mother’s school (24-5). Robinson recalls that she “was permitted to select passages both in prose and verse for the studies of [her] infant pupils” and also “read sacred and moral lessons on saints’ days and Sunday evenings” (26-7).

Robinson’s brief position as a governess allows her to assume a position of intellectual authority. According to Mary Kelley, “literary domestics mastered their ABCs and their domestic skills together, and once again, intellectual stimulation that had a tenuous relationship to the overriding social admonition to be wives and mother contributed to a confused frequently conflicted sense of the female as a thinking being” (62). With Robinson’s position both of authority and futility, she, like Charke, could not fully “sustain” her intellectual pursuits (Kelley 62). Rather, her position as governess provides her with yet another opportunity to continue to hone her mastery of the English language and practice her elocution, which would later be instrumental in her theatrical career.

A Product of Discovery: Robinson’s Theatrical Beginning

Like Woffington, Robinson found the stage through discovery when her talents were noticed by a person of theatrical prominence. Robinson found “her early love for lyric harmony” during her attendance at “Oxford House” in “Marylebone,” which “led [her]” to develop “a

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46 According to Kelley, with neither college nor a public career in the offing and without objectives beyond immediate studies, the joys of intellectual awakening were difficult to sustain” (62).
47 Actresses where expected to exhibit a certain “quickness” and “education” and having the ability to “read, or at least memorize easily by rote, requiring their possessing a certain basic quickness and education” (Nussbaum 37, 45). Robinson’s brief position as an English teacher enables her to practice reading and reciting passages of drama.
fondness for the more sublime scenes of dramatic poetry” (32). As a passionate pupil in her area of study, Robinson devoted herself not only to reading dramatic pieces but also composing them, which made her an ideal candidate for an apprenticeship in the theater (32). Robinson’s accomplishments at finishing school resulted in her being noticed by “Mrs. Hervey” who recommended her to “the dancing-master at Oxford House, Mr. Hussey” who was also the “ballet-master at Covent Garden Theatre,” which gave Robinson her first theatrical connection as she accessed the theatrical world through the recommendation of Mr. Hussey (32).

Just as Madame Violante sought the consent of Woffington’s mother, Robinson’s mother too “was consulted as to the propriety of [her daughter] making the stage [her] profession” as cultural perception still regarded the stage as an irreputable occupation for women (Robinson 32; Richards 24). Robinson’s later details her mother’s anxiety, noting that she “dreaded the perils, the temptations to which an unprotected girl would be exposed in so public a situation” (34). To first attain access to the theater, the young woman had to assuage her mother’s fears and obtain her consent. Robinson discusses the tactics used to convince a “genteel-poor woman” that the stage did not affect her daughter’s “propriety” as Robinson recalls that “many cited examples of females who, even in that perilous and arduous situation, preserved an unspotted fame, inclined her to listen to the suggestion, and to allow of my consulting some master of the art as to my capability of becoming an ornament to the theatre” (32). After the school obtains Mrs. Darby’s permission, Robinson officially becomes an apprentice of the theater and she begins to study theatrical roles under a “master of the art” just as Woffington had done before her (32).

Once Robinson enters her theatrical apprenticeship and devotes herself to the theatrical profession, she gains access to the social network of those that discovered her talent. She is “introduced to Mr. Hull of Covent Garden Theatre” who listens to her “recite some passages of
the character of Jane Shore” and “seems delighted with [her] attempt” (33). While Woffington also utilized the social network of her discoverer, Madame Violante, she could not draw upon familial acquaintances; Mary Robinson, however, could rely on familial social connections. She “was shortly after presented, by a friend of [her] mother's, to Mr. Garrick” (34). According to Robinson, her mother relied upon “the protection which a venerable and respectable friend . . . Samuel Cox, Esq., the intimate friend of Mr. Garrick, and an honour to those laws of which he was a distinguished professor” (34). Through her discovery and the influence of her family’s social network, Robinson gains audience with one of the most successful actors and stage tutors of the eighteenth-century: David Garrick.

Garrick assumes his position as Robinson’s manager and, like Madame Violante, carefully chooses the part for his charge’s “debut” and begins to give Robinson individualized instruction, which prepares her for performance (35). He carefully evaluates his apprentice and determines the range of roles she can play. Robinson’s age caused a reduction in her the number of roles she could play as she “was too young for anything beyond the girlish character; and the dignity of tragedy afforded but few opportunities for the display of such juvenile talents” (35). Garrick carefully weighs these observations until he “resolves” on the part of Cordelia, which played to the strengths of his charge. After he chooses her part, Garrick requests Robinson rehearse “as much as possible till the period fixed on for [her] appearance on the stage and just as she had practiced before with Mrs. Lorrington, Robinson dives into the role of student under Garrick and continually perfects her performance. She notes that her “tutor was the most sanguine in his expectations of my success, and every rehearsal seemed to strengthen his flattering opinion” (35). With the aid of her stage tutor’s instruction, Robinson readies herself for
her appearance on the stage and uses the techniques Garrick taught her\(^{48}\) to impress the crowd, earning her access to Garrick’s theatrical legacy as she convinces her tutor of her abilities. Garrick carefully instructed her in skills that would be useful in performance such as singing, reading, and dancing. Robinson recalls that her tutor would occasionally “dance a minuet with [her],” ask her “to sing the favourite ballads of the day,” and ask her to recite lines, which she notes “most pleased him” as he loved the sound of her voice and informed her that it “closely resembled that of his favourite Cibber” (37). As she excelled in these tasks, her stage tutor become increasingly convinced of her performance and he soon was “delighted with everything [she] did” (37). In becoming Garrick’s understudy, Robinson gains social recognition as his pupil, which ties his fame to hers and also gains access to his social network, allowing her to navigate theatrical politics and market her celebrity. As Garrick’s star pupil, Robinson finds herself at the center of public attention, recalling that she appeared as “an object of attention” in the public eye. Robinson became known in the public eye as “the juvenile pupil of Garrick—the promised Cordelia,” which garnered public attention and fame as her celebrity became tied with Garrick’s legacy \(^{49}\)(37).

Once Robinson’s name becomes associated with Garrick, she becomes tied to his public legacy and benefits from her tutor’s celebrity. Cheryl Wanko observes that “Garrick’s power at Drury Lane was indisputable” (188). Robinson characterizes her tutor’s power as “one who

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\(^{48}\) By the middle of the eighteenth-century, actors and actresses practiced naturalism when they assumed roles. According to Joseph Roach in *Player’s Passion*, Garrick understood nature as “the seminal interplay between the plastic arts and theatrical theory—in particular, the actor’s fascination with pictures and statues—corresponds directly . . . to the interaction between art and science that encouraged the most advanced thinking in the period . . . The body was viewed as a machine, enabled to be enacted for periods of action, moving through scenes as a “transitory painting” (Roach 59, 87). See Lessing’s ideal of acting for more information.

\(^{49}\) Garrick’s fame also stems from the strategy of ghosting as his audiences recollect his past performances and he becomes increasingly associated with his roles. According to Laura Engel in *Fashioning Celebrity*, “traces of particular versions . . . will haunt the minds and imaginations of spectators” (Engel 607). The trace of his celebrity extends to those associated with him, especially Robinson who was one of his understudies.
possessed more power, both to awe and to attract, than any man [she] ever met with” (37). Garrick’s influence extended beyond the theater; Wanko recounts, “as an actor, he could move a theater audience to tears or applause; as a manager, he could make or break dramatists’ and actors’ careers; as a society figure, he could intercede with important people for favors” (188). The social network of Garrick extended beyond the stage. His influence even extended into retirement as when Robinson seeks reentry to the theatrical world, her “intention” is “intimated to” Garrick who even after several “seasons retired from the stage, kindly promise[s]” his pupil “protection” and resumes his position as her “tutor” (Robinson 127). With her identity tied to one of the most influential actors of the eighteenth century, Robinson continually benefits from her connection to Garrick and his social network as she uses the social networks she and Garrick cultivated even after she leaves the theater.

Robinson, like Charke and Woffington, positions herself within eighteenth-century theatrical tradition and masters what Brooks’ classifies as Garrick’s “mid-century innovations” to eighteenth-century performance (98). According to Joseph Roach, the actor “lived at the decisive moment in the development of theatrical theory” and asserts that “Garrick, entering at the right historical movement, renovated theatrical semiotics, founding his vocabulary of expressive gesture on a new order of understanding, a revised concept of what nature is and means” (12, 57). Brooks reinforces Roach’s understanding of Garrick, noting that “since the mid-century innovations of actors like David Garrick, and acting theorists including John Hill and Aaron Hill, performers had been counselled to surrender themselves to the role, effacing their own identities so that they could transform themselves into another person” (98). As the
actress masked her identity in her performance of the character, she also links her identity to her public performance, leading to a growing public celebrity.

Robinson’s performances reflect her stage tutor’s instruction and influence on her public celebrity as she applies innovative strategies that Garrick developed onstage. While Garrick made innovations to old styles of performance, Brooks asserts that “the highest praise for a star actress in eighteenth-century commentaries” remained the ability “to transform herself convincingly into the person she impersonated” (101). Roach characterizes Garrick’s innovations as “quite modern, something neither custom-bound nor superstitious” (56). Garrick, Roach observes, “reputedly substituted speed, agility, and variety for the apparent heaviness and monotony of the reigning oratorical style,” emphasizing the appearance of naturalness (56). Garrick drew upon “stage tricks and gestures,” which he characterized as “scientific” and asserted that “‘science’—natural, metaphysical, and consequential deductions” was the source of an actor’s “authority” and viewed “the human body as a ‘moving statue’” (Roach 59). Robinson uses these techniques in her performances upon the London stage and reflects her tutor’s commitment to naturalism. In 1794, Robinson wrote, “acting must be the perfection of art; nature, rude and spontaneous” (Thibaudeau 303). Her view of nature and acting matches her mentor’s teachings as the performer effaced themselves in the roles of the characters, performing their roles as naturally as possible while still participating in stylized actions via recognizable gestures. Robinson not only gained access to these innovations, but she used them to cultivate her celebrity, performing the role of a “moving statue” to be viewed by the public on and

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50 According to Lisa M. Wilson, Robinson “remained self-conscious about her relationship to the critical apparatus [the media] and she took an active role in shaping her public identity . . . learn[ing] how such media might be manipulated (173). See Judith Barbour’s “Garrick’s Version: The Production of ‘Perdita’” for more on Sheridan and initial identity construction.
offstage, which allowed her to practice mid-century theatrical innovations that still called for actresses to efface themselves in performance of a character (Roach 59).

**Embracing the Whore: Mistress or Victim**

Robinson uses the techniques Garrick taught her to craft her celebrity in the public eye, carefully constructing her persona on and offstage. Her performances of Garrick’s technical strategies evoke audience sympathy and investment, representing what Asleson characterizes as the shift in an actress’ value during the eighteenth-century (1). As the actress negotiated elite societal networks, they were able to independently cultivate their fortunes through celebrity. Asleson asserts that “actresses were essentially the only group of women with both the power and the license to orchestrate public perceptions of themselves—chiefly through contrived stage performances, but also through myriad forms of personal propaganda and self-fashioning” (1). According to Haefner and Wilson, performance “challenged the boundary between public and private, between the virtual and the real” and spilled into various arenas, including the domestic, public, and political arenas, which gave actresses like Robinson influence in various arenas (45). Throughout the beginning and mid eighteenth century, the actress had been positioned as “moveable property” to be exchanged between theatrical companies and audiences; however, Roach asserts that “by the end of the century this form of moveable property had been reduced to fetishized property, to the actress herself as a product, who turned that self-commodification into a position from which to mobilize her rights as a woman even before the 1790s,” leading actresses like Robinson to begin cultivating their personal celebrities, marketing their personas on and offstage to the public (Haefner and Wilson 45).

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⁵¹ See Nussbaum’s chapter on the Economics of Celebrity.
As she became more adept both in performance and cultivating her image, Robinson also “seiz[es] control over [her] own mythmaking” by “publish[ing]” her writings and cultivating what Asleson calls “a pervasive presence beyond the stage” (1). Within her Memoirs, Robinson indicates her awareness of the public’s reception of her roles, noting that she “was always received with the most flattering approbation” (131). She is also aware of her audience’s favorite characters that she has performed, particularly “Ophelia, Juliet, and Rosalind” as well as “Palmira” (133). Robinson uses her knowledge of her audience’s favor to craft a persona that garners her applause and causes the public to associate her with previous roles. Through this awareness, Robinson carefully molds her celebrity through the strategy of ghosting—using her previous roles to inform her audience’s perception of her and increase her fame. She uses traces of her previous performances to enhance her celebrity with her audience; she draws on past theatrical performances and writings that position her in a sympathetic light and seek to reinforce her celebrity.

Within Memoirs, Robinson evokes the strategy of ghosting by calling attention to highly feminized costumes as well as her previous performances. According to Engel, “Robinson’s use of clothing—what she was wearing, what others were wearing, and how others viewed her outfits is tied to the ways in which her various identities strategically appear and disappear throughout her memoir” (64). By listing her roles in chronological order and detailing her dress, Robinson reminds her audience of her previous experiences upon the stage, linking her current identity as a literary celebrity to that of her theatrical past. In detailing her reentry to the theater, Robinson uses her iconic costumes to characterize one of her most famous roles, Juliet. She describes her dress as “a pale pink satin, trimmed with crape, richly spangled with silver”

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52 According to Paula Byrne, Robinson was a trend-setter, possessing a body that could stop traffic (xviii).
(Robinson 128). She wears “white feathers” upon her head and “for the last scene” appears in “white satin and completely plain” with the exception of a “veil of the most transparent gauze, which fell quite to my feet from the back of my head, and a string of beads round my waist, to which was suspended a cross appropriately fashioned” (128). She uses a highly feminized style to characterize her early role, appearing youthful by wearing “pale pink satin” and also virginal through her repetition of “white” in both the satin and the head-feathers (128). Engel argues that “Robinson’s use of fashionable clothing allows her to project versions of idealized femininity in order to direct attention away from her scandalous behavior” (64). I assert that the effect of describing her dress is twofold; Robinson ghosts the audience by inviting them to recall her previous performance, reminding them of her celebrity as an accomplished actress before she became known as Perdita53. Her recollection of dress also enables her to rewrite her image as a fallen woman as she draws attention to virtuous attributes: virginity and naivety54.

Robinson also attempts to re-fashion her position as a fallen woman, repositioning the affair with the prince through rhetorical techniques that position her as a victim of circumstance. Using the literary skills that she developed during her masculine education, Robinson manipulates her affair with the prince to garner public sympathy, seeking a pardon from public perception much like Charke, who later in life, positions her love affair with her husband and seeks to repair her reputation both in public and with her father. To garner public sympathy, Robinson repositions her marriage to her husband as an act of coercion. She recounts her battle with smallpox and justifies marrying Robinson as the culmination of her mother’s influence and

53 Robinson became known as the Prince of Wales’ mistress after he fell in love with her performance of Perdita in *A Winter’s Tale* (Byrne 99).
54 By the end of the eighteenth-century, female artifice and cunning was increasing disfavored (Bennett 80).
his persistence rather than a love match (41-2). She shifts the focus on her marriage, casting herself in the role of passive victim.

Through her writings, Robinson positions herself as a helpless victim that falls for her husband’s façade, which evokes audience sympathy. She first dispels any notion of a love match, indicating that she gave her heart to him out of “gratitude” rather than passion (41-2). According to Robinson, her future husband “exerted all his assiduity to win [her] affections” and that after a battle with smallpox threatened her theatrical career, her husband “professed a disinterested fondness . . . [and] every day he attended with the zeal of a brother, and that zeal made an impression of gratitude upon [her] heart” (41-2). In detailing her future husband’s persistence, Robinson again takes a passive role in her seduction. She positions her suitor as an intentional deceiver and she as a victim sincerely believing his affection as evidenced by his persistence, which further garners public sympathy. She notes that “Mr. Robinson was indefatigable in his attentions” and recollecting that “day and night Mr. Robinson devoted himself to the task of consoling my mother, and of attending to her darling boy; hourly, and indeed momentarily, Mr. Robinson's praises were reiterated with enthusiasm by my mother” (41). By showcasing her husband’s persistence, the actress seeks to position herself as a faithful, virtuous maiden that was seduced by the persistent attentions of a suitor who fooled not only her but also her mother, making her a powerless pawn in a seduction narrative that played on the sympathies of an obedient daughter (41).

By repositioning her marriage as an act of coercion and deception, Mary refashions her identity as Robinson’s wife as the culmination of daughterly obedience rather than a love match, which works to refashion her position as fallen woman and teaches her audience about the behind-the-scenes life of an actress. As she distances herself from her domestic duties and details
the horrors of her marital state, Robinson reorients the public’s perception of her marriage as one that she agreed to out of daughterly obedience rather than love and uses her refashioning as a helpless, naïve youth to distance herself from her scandalous affair with the prince. She showcases the hardships that befell her in an ill-fitted marriage and she subtlety shifts the blame for the union onto her mother, noting that “every day” her mother found “some new mark of respect” for the man “till Mr. Robinson became so great a favourite that he seemed to her the most perfect of existing beings” (40). Fulfilling the role of a good daughter, Robinson listens to her mother’s advice and desires to please her parents. In obeying her mother’s wishes, she exhibits one of the virtues that Morgan Rooney asserts a young woman who hopes to become a good wife and mother should possess55 (356). Robinson indicates her awareness of her mother’s belief that her future husband would be a good match, noting that her mother confided that she thought Robinson “‘the kindest, the best of mortals” (40). She, moved by her future husband’s constancy and her mother’s desire to see her wed, “promise[s]” her mother that “in case [she] would recover, [she will] give him [her] hand in marriage” (40-1). In recounting this narrative to her audience, the actress revises her marriage as the fulfilment of filial obedience to her mother, aligning her with the virtuous behavior expected from an obedient daughter, which enables her to seek public sympathy and educate the public.

While she still participates in theatrical tradition, Robinson’s education is more extensive than Woffington’s and she gains access to the elite social network of her tutor, David Garrick. Even though she learns advancements in gestures through her stage tutor, Robinson still depends on a persona of artificiality as she loses her individual identity in the nature of the role, relying on Garrick’s instruction in the art of effacement to portray her characters accurately and garner

55 Rooney asserts that a young woman in the eighteenth-century should exhibit “obedience,” “chastity,” and “sensibility” (356).
accolade from her audience. As cultural anxiety over artificiality in performance continued to mount, Robinson’s technique and failed refashioning of her image as a fallen woman after her affair with the prince underscores the turbulence eighteenth-century actresses were experiencing as they navigated social, political, and public arenas. She also uses her celebrity to educate her audiences on the hardships actresses face on the eighteenth-century stage and, in her later years, becomes a successful author and poet that draws accolade from prominent literary figures like Coleridge (Byrne xxi).

Robinson later continues to cultivate her celebrity through her success as a poet and author. She uses her position as a writer to situate her authority as an eighteenth-century woman and actress. According to Jacqueline Labbe, Robinson uses her position as a “vulnerable woman in need of male protection as a marketing tool, refusing to be silenced by conventional ideas about gender roles” while still “using some of those conventions to her advantage” (68). According to Michael Gamer and Terry Robinson, the actress’ “poetic career in the 1790s” has been “interpreted” by Judith Pascoe and Betsy Bolton through a “rubric of performance” (220). Robinson’s poetry enabled her to refashion herself as a literary celebrity and continues to tie her to theatrical performance. Her poem, “To Him Who Will Understand It” is situated as a text for an audience “already in the know” as those who do not are left to “speculate on the identity” of its subject. The poem uses recollections from Robinson’s performances onstage suggest her identity and confirm it to what Gamer and Robinson suggest was a “fashionable few,” which positions her self-fashioning strategy in the larger “public-private strategies of events like the King’s Opera masquerades” (248). Robinson’s ability to slip between the boundaries of the private and public and the constructed and the real through her poetry emphasize her authority as an author and actress as she employs these strategies both in literary and theatrical realms.
Sarah Siddons: A Case Study of Trial & Error

During the last few decades of the century, increased cultural anxiety surrounding artificiality called for a new methodology of assuming the stage and cultivating celebrity; this methodology was less formalized and structured than the apprentice-master or inheritance systems of finding the stage (Bennett 80; McDonald 27). Rather, actresses who found themselves cultivating their celebrity through this mode capitalized on this changing culture of the eighteenth century and marketed themselves as authentic. As the profession of the traditional actress became associated with artificiality, which was increasingly condemned as Hannah More in her *Strictures on Female Education* explicates, girls’ lives “too much resemble[d] that of an actress; the morning is all rehearsal, and the evening is all performance,” an emphasis on authenticity emerged (105).

This changing culture became problematic for eighteenth-century actresses who, Brooks asserts, “was the very antithesis” of the “virtuous” woman (100). Brooks argues that “the virtuous bourgeois woman” was supposed to construct “a direct representation” of herself without artifice as actresses were viewed as “dissemblers” and made their “trade in false appearances” (100). In response to the changing public perception surrounding performances, actresses began to reposition their careers as “genuine,” which Brooks characterizes as a “significant reversal of the way in which earlier actresses had been expected to perform” as the art of imitation and effacement expected of early and mid-century actors and actresses became “increasingly at odds with prevailing discourse” (98). Sarah Siddons, one of the first actresses to market her celebrity as authentic, found her success on the stage through trial and error in the

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56 Both Bennett and McDonald observe that toward the end of the eighteenth century, society had begun to respond more negatively to artificiality, duplicity, and disguise, which were common in theatrical performance; a call for authenticity, naturalness, and truth began to emerge (Bennett 80; McDonald 27).
provinces and intense self-study of roles, which emphasized careful selection of only performances that could be considered authentic to her identity. Her careful manipulation of her identity both on and offstage enabled the actress to create a lasting legacy in the wake of transitioning cultural values, allowing her to transcend the turbulence of the late eighteenth-century stage.

**Disinheriting the Stage**

Like Charlotte Charke, Sarah Siddons inherited the stage as a child, giving her access to early theatrical practice, which allowed her to hone her skills as an actress. According to Roger Manvell, she was the daughter of “an actor-manager of some note” and just as Charke inherited her family’s connections, so too did Siddons. Siddons “inherit[s]” her family’s social network, notably Manvell argues “the goodwill not only of [John] Ward’s company, but of the circuit in which he had operated,” which greatly helped the family with their theatrical careers as “strolling players were entirely subject to the whims of the various authorities in whose districts they proposed to perform; to be known and even a little respected mattered considerably” (4-5). With an extensive social network, the Kemble family, like the Cibbers, created a theatrical dynasty as, according to McDonald, “no fewer than seven of the Kemble siblings became actors” (6). While Siddons does briefly inherit the stage, she does not inherit the same elite connections that Charlotte Charke did as Colley Cibber’s daughter; rather, she benefits because she “could be helpful to [her] thespian parents” as “many plays called for a character that a child actor could play, such as a fairy or perhaps just a child,” which gave Siddons the early practice that Charke also had (McDonald 7). At only eleven, Siddons undertook the role of Ariel in *The Tempest,* learning the theatrical profession in the varied atmosphere of the provinces.

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57 According to Manvell, “actor-manager John Ward” was Siddons’ grandfather and was dismayed when he discovered that “his strong-willed and beautiful daughter, Sally, fell in love” with Roger Kemble (4).
Unlike Charke, Siddons did not have access to a masculine education. Manvell records that the actress’ childhood education consisted of “recitation,” “elocution,” and as she aged, “some schooling at the hands of others when her parents were, for a few weeks, settled in one place” (11). The primary instruction she received consisted of teachings from her mother and father. From an early age, she learned the stage, observing her parents and practicing her recitation in appearances and her elocution during her early performances (Manvell 11). These early moments enabled Sarah to inherit the provincial stage, enabling her to enact a life of performance during childhood just as Charke did.

While she has access to her family’s provincial legacy and benefits as a daughter that entered the theater through inheritance, her advantages in theatrical society are minimal. While she, like Charke, achieves a debut on the London stage, she cannot sustain her performances in the capital. In *the Reminiscences of Sarah Kemble Siddons*, Siddons authors a reflection of her career as an actress, teaching her audience about theatrical life. She details her failure on the London stage and her encounters with theatrical colleagues, including actor and tutor, David Garrick. According to Siddons, she was sent for by Mr. Garrick “who had heard some account of [her] from the Aylesbury family” who had come to “see Siddons act the Fair Penitent” (4). After Garrick’s discovery of her talent, she, like his previous pupil, “receive[s] an Invitation from Garrick himself,” which gives her the opportunity to study under one of the greatest London actors, training in mid-century innovations that Mary Robinson mastered had previously as one of his pupils. Siddons recollects that she was “happy to be placed” and notes that, like most provincial players, she was “independent of any other claim” and the opportunity was

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58 Like Robinson, Siddons is discovered through a theatrical connection that views her talent and recommends her to Garrick.
59 Manvell records that provincial “actors were paid for each working week on about the scale of artisans (a mere laboring family might earn collectively during this period of the century as little as one pound a week)” (4-6); from
“well worth my poor five pounds a week” (Siddons 4). As she transitions from the provinces to the capital, Siddons enjoys the potential for a higher salary and public celebrity as she trains under Garrick, accessing the same social network to which Robinson also had access.

Her debut resulted in abject failure, causing her to leave the stage and become embittered against Garrick’s lack of support. According to McDonald, her “inaugural appearance at Drury Lane . . . fail[s] to please the public, the press, and the retiring David Garrick” (9). Her audience left unimpressed, “complain[ing] . . . about her feeble voice and her physical awkwardness” which were “conditions attributable partly to her . . . inexperience in the larger playhouses of the capital, and even as the season advanced and her health improved, she failed to fulfill her promise” (9). With her lack of experience and ability to capture a London audience, Siddons’ inheritance proves fruitless for a career on the capital stage. She lacks the experience and training Charke gained through her parents. Perhaps, Siddons’ failure can be attributed to her upbringing in the provincial theaters rather than the capital establishments that the Cibbers inherited as rustic players were often, Sybil Rosenfeld explicates, from a variety of trades that turned their attention to the theater to make their fortune (27). She notes that “country acting” was considered “wretched” by those that performed on the London stage as the elite often argued that the poor performances were “due to the unsuitability for the stage of the tradesmen, prentices, and journeymen who tried their fortunes on it” (27). Mozeen reinforces this notion, observing that “the strolling companies are commonly a set of undutiful ‘prentices, idle Artificers, and Boys run mad with reading what they don’t understand”’ (27). These observations of Siddons’ inherited legacy are not positive and, rather, suggest a crudeness to her acting ability—one that elite society would have found foreign and unfavorable.

*Reminiscences*, readers know that Siddons earned five pounds a week in the provinces. See Sybil Rosenfeld for more on provincial theatrical salaries.
Siddons captures her devastation and confusion upon being rejected from the London stage, which forces her family “back to the sticks” and leaves her disinherited from the stage (Siddons 6-7, McDonald 9). She recalls her time with Garrick where she, like Robinson and other successful apprentices, experienced lavish “praises that were most liberally and flatteringly conferrd upon [her]” (4). Despite her perceived success as his apprentice, she acknowledges that her experience “ended in worse than nothing” and she could not “excite any great sensation” on the London stage, leaving her “merely tolerated” [her emphasis] (Siddons 4). Siddons’ failure is poignant; after successfully acting in the provinces and learning the stage through methods of inheritance and discovery, she cannot sustain her celebrity on the London stage under Garrick who, McDonald elaborates, was famous for “bring[ing] great social distinction as well as genius to the London theater” (6).

While Garrick was famous for bringing great actresses to the stage, he failed to honor Siddons, which ultimately resulted in her dismissal. Even though Garrick flattered his pupil, “sending [her] into the Boxes when he acted any of his great Characters,” he did not fulfill his promise to the young family as he had intimated that he would “procure” the actress “a good Engagement with the new Managers” and instructed Siddons to “put [her] cause entirely into his hands” (Siddons 6). After Garrick fails to secure her a position with the new management, the young actress receives “an official letter from the Prompter of Drury Lane acquainting [her] that [her] services were no longer necessary” (6). Emotionally bereft, Siddons leaves the London stage with her two babies and husband in tow (6). Despite inheriting the stage as Charlotte Charke did, Sarah Siddons’ early career fails to impress her London audience and she soon loses her opportunity in the capital, forcing her to return to the provinces and a new mode of learning: trial and error.
Rediscovering her Role: Siddons’ Time in the Provinces

dismissed from the capital, Siddons returns to the provinces where she utilizes the methodology of trial and error to refashion her celebrity and improve her performance. Unlike the capital where actresses frequently competed against one another, the provincial theaters lacked a large number of performers clamoring for roles. According to Rosenfeld, “smaller companies were as short of actors as they were of properties” (25). She further notes that it “was no novelty for the same person to perform two, or even three characters in the same piece, proceeding from the scarcity of performers; while principal actors have perhaps five or six parts assigned them for each successive night” (25). Manvell reinforces Rosenfeld’s observation, nothing that “most players received their initial training in the provinces, which turned them from youthful, stage-struck amateurs into audience-hardened professionals” (6). Siddons too points to this unique environment where actresses could test out their skills. In Reminiscences, she recalls her time in the provinces, penning:

Here my talents were encouraged by the greatest indulgence and I may say with some admiration. Tragedies which had been almost banished again resumed their proper interest, but I had the mortification of being obliged to Personate many subordinate characters in Comedy, the first being in the possession of another Lady. This I was obliged to submit to, or forfeit part of my week’s salary, too serious a diminution (7).

In the provinces, Siddons is admired and indulged by both her audience and her peers, which aligns with Rosenfeld’s observation that as London theaters were considered superior to provincial, “London experience was carefully advertised by managers in their playbills, and was certainly looked up to by the audience” (28). In the Memoirs of Sylvester Daggerwood, an actress could be “sure of approbation if [she] came from a London theatre, though [she] had been but an underling there; and, according to Goldsmith, an actress of nine months’ London

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60 See Nussbaum, Rival Queens
experience was deferred to as a judge” (28). With London experience, Siddons was “looked up to” by her audience, her talents “encouraged” and “admir[ed]” (Rosenfeld 28, Siddons 7). Her attempts at performing various roles was indulged.

In the provinces, Siddons must engage trial and error as her new methodology; the structure of the country theater demanded her versatility. She was forced to undertake multiple roles, playing “subordinate characters in Comedy” in addition to tragedy (7). According to Manvell, in “July 1799, she rehearsed and performed nearly thirty different characters (including the Queen in Hamlet, Portia, Juliet and Imogen) and from March to the end of May she had to travel to and from Bristol several times a week to do so” (57). Rosenfeld reinforces Manvell’s observation, nothing that “the shortage of actors meant hard work and great versatility; it also entailed rapid studying of parts. Parker knew an actor who was given the part of Iago on Monday and had to play it on Wednesday; another, we learn, had two days to prepare Sir George Airy and no rehearsal” (26). The quick turnaround of parts and the short notice was common for Siddons. Manvell characterizes her schedule as follows:

When the dual system was in full operation, she would rehearse in Bath on Monday morning, play in Bristol that night, return by coach overnight or early the next day to appear in Bath on Tuesday evening. Wednesdays and Fridays were allocated to Bristol, and Tuesdays, Thursday and Saturdays to Bath. Thursday was the day at first given over to tragedy (57).

With this rapid pace, Siddons honed her elocution and recitation skills, learning to perform in a variety of roles in a short timeframe. She also had to endure “subordinate roles” in comedy or “forfeit her money,” which forced her to perform less than ideal roles suited to her character and gave her a wider range to make plenty of mistakes and revisions.
Siddons practiced the strategy of trial and error from an early age, which further locates this methodology in the provinces. Thomas Holcroft, a member of Roger Kemble’s company, recounts:

A benefit had been fixed for some of the family, in which Miss Kemble, then a little girl, was to come forward in some part, as a juvenile prodigy. The taste of the audience was not, it seems, so accommodating as in the present day, and the extreme youth of the performer disposed the gallery to noise and uproar instead of admiration. Their turbulent dissatisfaction quite disconcerted the child, and she was retiring bashfully from the stage when her mother, who was a woman of a high spirit, and alarmed for the success of her little actress, came forward, and leading the child to the front of the house, made her repeat the fable of the Boys and the Frogs, which entirely turned the tide of popular opinion in her favour (54-5).

This early account of Siddons’ childhood demonstrates the practice and implementation of such a strategy as the young actress fails onstage and invites the public’s scorn, resulting in her trial and error. She is then forced to revise, in this moment, by her mother who swoops in to save her young child’s performance and future. Sally redirects Siddons’ efforts, turning her performance into a success and earns her back “the tide of popular opinion” (54). In this story, Siddons performs her earliest navigation of trial and error, practicing and failing until she finds what will garner her success and celebrity with the help and careful cautioning of her mother and by turning to what she knows she can do well: “the fable of the Boys and the Frogs” (54-5).

While Sarah achieves accolade in the provinces, she also experiences error. When she first returns after her failure, she experiences the position of “reasonable advantage” that a London actress could claim in the provinces, but upon “open[ing] in a theatre in New Street, Birmingham . . . Sarah’s voice was still considered to be weak” and resulted in her being “sent on” to provinces further out to seek employment with a diminished status, forcing her to “labour hard” during her time in the countryside (Siddons 7). Her hard work ultimately pays off and she improves her talent, leading her to return to Drury Lane where she encounters a changing
cultural climate as the early and mid-century traditions of the theater were becoming “increasingly at odds with prevailing discourse,” leading to public disfavor with the profession and forcing her to once again readjust her celebrity (Brooks 98).

Siddons upon returning the capital takes the audience by storm through her mastery of gesture and her careful selection of roles that she determines to be suitable for her. Her time in the provinces enabled Sarah to develop a wide range of theatrical experience, allowing her to learn the art of self-studying as she had to learn roles quickly and sometimes without a rehearsal61. Within The Memoirs of Mrs. Sarah Siddons, James Boaden argues that Siddon’s success resulted from “the discipline of her mind” (218). After being asked how she approached playing a part, Boaden quotes Siddons as saying, “when a part is first put before me for study, I look it over in a general way to see if it is in Nature, and if it is, I am sure it can be played” and characterizes “her mode of study, in her apartment” as “silent” (218). At the silent apartment, Siddons “conceived there all that she meant to do” but did not give voice to her role, waiting for rehearsal and carefully reflecting on the part to be played (218). During this period of intense study, Siddons carefully reflected on the “Nature” of the role to see if it fit her, drawing upon her provincial performances to see if the role was in fact suitable to her (218). Siddons also uses her intense period of self-study to also enhance her gestures, which affects her celebrity and enables her to perform the role with what Manvell calls “fresh[ness]” and I call authenticity (26). Manvell asserts that Siddons “turn[s] a fresh gaze on each of her roles, identifying, exploiting moments in which the alteration of tone or the sudden gesture might enhance the apparently natural representation of the character” (26). She draws from the training she received from David Garrick as she intensely studies and performs classical gesture as evidenced below:

61 See Rosenfeld for more on Parker’s observations of strolling players (28).
In this image, Siddons practices the art of classical gesture, studying the theatrical movements passed down from one generation to next just as a star pupil in the apprentice-master system should. In Charlotte Brewster Jordan’s article, “Mrs. Siddons, Queen of the English Stage,” the actress states, that the “first thing that suggested to her the mode of expressing intensity of feeling was the position of Egyptian statues,” which she mimics (1529). According to Michael Booth, Siddons “like Garrick was capable of rapid changes of expression” and “audiences would recognize each passion because its outward signs were universally known and peculiar to that particular passion” (50-1). As the public began to disfavor artificiality, a universal symbol that was easily recognizable within the theater only emphasized the construction and artifice of the performance.

After mastering the classical gestures of theatrical tradition, Siddons continues to improve her performances, trying new techniques that she innovates. Mrs. Anna Jameson in *A Commonplace Book of Thoughts, Memories, and Fancies: Original and Selected* recollects “Mrs. Siddons, when looking over the statues in Lord Lansdowne’s galley, told him that one mode of

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62 Gilbert, Austin. “Seven attitudes by Mrs. Siddons, the first attitude being a man. From left to right in the upper row: Calista, Euphrasia, Constance. From left to right in the lower row, Calista, Imogen, Lady Randolph, Belvidera.” *Chironomia*, 1806, British Library, BLL01012128512.
expressing intensity of feeling was suggested to her by the position of some of the Egyptian statues with the arms close down at the sides and the hands clenched” (302). Siddons uses her observations to inform her art, practicing her newfound techniques, actively engaging in trial and error. According to Boaden:

There was also visible in Kemble's manner at times a sacrifice of energy of action to grace. . . She arose and placed herself in the attitude of one of the old Egyptian statues; the knees joined together and the feet turned a little inwards. She placed her elbows close to her sides, folded her hands, and held them upright, with the palms pressed to each other.

Siddons mimics what she sees as the gesture of the Egyptian statue, copying a pedagogical tradition that dominated the eighteenth-century and dated back to the classical period. According to Lucia Dacome, commonplace books “were part of a pedagogic tradition related to rhetoric and the art of memory that dated back to the classical period” and they “provided repositories for arranging notes, excerpts, drawings, and objects” (603). Originally used by men as a source of self-inter-disciplinary study and observation, the commonplace book soon became a way to self-teach and record art, literature, and other instances of education. In some instances, a commonplace book served as a record for thought as “readers had already familiarized themselves with the practice of keeping an account of their readings, excerpting passages of texts, and copying them in their notebooks under a relevant heading” (Dacome 603). By recording pieces of personal interest, both men and women benefited from self-education, improving not only their minds but also their morals as they recorded bits of important texts, images, and conversations. As women called for a revision in female curriculum, commonplace books began to be used by women and became a way to self-teach and record art, literature, and other instances of education. By recording pieces of personal interest, both men and women
benefited from self-education, improving not only their minds but also their morals as they recorded bits of important texts, images, and conversations.

To create an authentic gesture, Siddons continues to utilize a series of trial and error to improve the classical gesture until she has the desired effect upon her audience, indicating her awareness of the strategy she encountered in the provinces. According to an excerpt in Boaden:

Having made us observe that she had assumed one of the most constrained and therefore most ungraceful positions possible, she proceeded to recite the curse of King Lear on his undutiful offspring in a manner which made hair rise and flesh creep, and then called on us to remark the additional effect which was gained by the concentrated energy which the unusual and ungraceful posture in itself implied (219).

Siddons’ obsession on getting the “additional effect” reflects what Richards characterizes as “a kind of histrionic sprezzatura” where actresses were expected to “assum[e] a demanding role without apparent difficulty or effort” (Richards 27). Siddons works to perfect this sprezzatura, which became, Richards argues, “a chief criterion for evaluating theatrical success” (27). As Siddons exudes originality, she distances herself from the highly constructed nature and appears genuine to her audiences as evidenced by the reception of Mrs. Siddons’s onstage death. In 1787, a review of her performance as Arpasia in Tamerlane captures Siddons’ theatrical innovation. The reviewer describes “Mrs. Siddons’s manner of receiving the death of Moneses and the struggle that ended in her own was one of the best efforts of the art we ever beheld” (Booth 50).

In acting the death, Michael Booth asserts that the actress “cross[es] that fine line between identification with a role and the actor’s conscious control of that identification” (50). As she blurs this line and innovates her techniques through intense self-study, a component of a masculine education, and trial and error, Siddons creates the illusion of authenticity onstage. She navigates the increasingly more negative public opinion of actresses who followed theatrical
tradition by using a newfound educational strategy that relies on self-discipline and innovation, leading to an intense self-study approach that enabled her to craft the illusion of an authentic persona.

**Staging the Future**

While she works to develop the appearance of an authentic performance that goes beyond mid-century innovation, Siddons also seeks to position her celebrity as a representation of her authentic self, carrying her legacy on the stage to the public. According to Brooks, Siddons “construct[s] her ‘performances of self’ at the turn of the century, presenting themselves not as dissembling or transforming themselves into another character” (100). Rather, the actress “frame[s] her performances as expressions of [her] own emotions and authentic selves through the medium of the character” (100). To ensure she maintains her authentic appearance, Siddons, like Robinson, carefully stages her authentic persona through manipulation of various mediums—memoir, performance, and portraiture.

Siddons uses the power of memoir to reinforce her persona as an authentic celebrity. Despite self-studying very intensely before performance and drawing from her experience in the provinces, she markets herself as “untaught, unpractised Girl,” which gives her the illusion of appearing natural and authentic as she distances herself from theatrical tradition (20). She uses her identity as an “untaught” actress to market herself with the period’s changing discourse. In the *Letters to a Young Lady*, John Bennett asserts that young ladies should develop an ‘unstudied openness’ as ‘young people are, generally, the most amiable, that are most undisguised (80). As she aligns herself with the prevailing discourse of an authentic identity, Siddons markets her

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63 Self-discipline was a component of a masculine education where students could pursue their own intellectual interests through sustained study (Turberville 159).
64 See Michael Booth and Joseph Roach for more on Garrick’s gestures.
celebrity as a response to the cultural anxieties surrounding artificiality (Brooks 98, 100).

According to Brooks, “Siddons’s ‘performances of self’ at the end of the century gave every impression of being the result of a radical change . . . in the way that [she] represented her theatrical work (101). While her contemporaries “clearly recognized” that the famous actress used “well-established theatrical techniques” and was clearly not unstudied, Siddons’ careful manipulation of this public perception of her performance enables her to reposition her celebrity and profession in a more favorable light with her late eighteenth-century audience (101).

Siddons also uses her identity as a wife and mother to shield her celebrity from scrutiny during and after her performances, which garners her an unsullied reputation and enables her to continue her illusion of authenticity. Through her careful study of roles, Siddons, according to Brooks, follows “Aaron Hill’s work” and “apply[s] the ‘look to the idea’ or in other words embodying the correct physicality for the idea being portrayed” and through this imitation “could produce the same effect as starting with imagination” (362). In applying her newfound methodology, she succeeds in repositioning herself not only as an authentic persona but also as a faithful wife and mother, tying her profession to economic success to care for her children. In her return to Drury Lane, Siddons alerts her audience to her authenticity as a mother, having the role of a child played by her own, which emphasizes the public persona she seeks to build (Hamilton). She intentionally crafts the appearance of “unstudied openness” where the audience believes that they are viewing both the character and the actress herself, which causes them to emotionally invest and engage with Siddons favorably as compared to Robinson who was known for her promiscuity and artificiality after her doomed affair with the prince (Bennett 80). Siddons carefully blends her domestic identity with that of her onstage persona, tying her performance to

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65 The 1785 portrait by William Hamilton depicts Siddons and her son in the tragedy of Isabella, linking Siddons’ co-performance with her son to her identity as a mother.
her domestic life intentionally. For instance, after one night, Siddons retreats back to her family for a quiet meal in rather than celebrating her success; to the public, she appears to place domesticity above her profession, which adds to her claim of respectability (Booth 18-9).

As she continues to position herself as open and authentic in her memoir and performances, Siddons also draws upon the medium of sculpture and portraiture to position her unsullied reputation and maintain her celebrity. According to Noble, she studied under Anne Seymour Damer, learning the art of modelling (164-5). The bust, pictured below, is, according to the auction-house Christie’s in London, a “self-portrait” with a “rigid frontal pose and idealized features.” The portrait aligns with Aselon’s assertion that Siddons chose to represent herself in an idealized manner so that she maintained the conventions of classical art” (67). The bust is described as Siddons “facing frontally and wearing a headscarf;” it is “signed to the truncation of the proper left shoulder and is mounted “on an integral circular socle” that is “painted with grey paint” (“A Plaster”).

![Figure 7. Mrs. Sarah Siddons](https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/a-plaster-self-portrait-bust-of-sarah-siddons-4750090-details.aspx)

Figure 7. Mrs. Sarah Siddons, Siddons, Early 19th C.

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The bust invites the viewer to associate Siddons with classical tradition and timelessness and invites viewers to consider the actress as a subject. In this self-portrayal, Siddons is not sexualized, unlike portraiture and depictions of other actresses. Rather, she is represented in a classic and modest style with a slight smile and a regal bearing, associating her image with nobility and tradition.

In her 1785 portrait, Gainsborough positions Siddons in theatrical tradition just as he did Robinson and, in doing so, gives Siddons’ audience the ability to evoke the strategy of ghosting as the audience views Siddons visibly on and offstage, carrying with them memories of her past performances. The portrait, pictured below,

![Mrs. Sarah Siddons](image)

subtly alludes to the actress’ sexuality. She still carries a muff, a symbol of an actress’ sexuality that according to Engel “functions as a stylish and elegant accessory designed to promote Siddons’ image as a woman of quality and grace” (12). She also wears a large theatrical hat,

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which announces her as a performer. Her dress, unlike Robinson’s, does not have a large expanse of bare flesh and she modestly looks away from the audience, uninviting her spectator’s stare and yet appearing alluring to a captivated audience simultaneously. Deep red hues frame her image and yet, she does not embrace their passionate impulses by looking seductively at her audience. Her breasts are covered, add height to her neckline. Her dress is a soft blue and a lady’s gown, which gives her the appearance of a domestic woman rather than an alluring mistress. Through careful positioning in the portrait, Siddons commands respect from her audience as they associate her with another authentic identity: the appearance of modesty. She successfully performs her character—both in self-portrayal and portraiture—while “foregrounding herself in the role [as an authentic performer],” enabling her to navigate public favor and maintain her spotless reputation (Brooks 98-99).

**Conclusion**

While the methods of inheritance and discovery allowed actresses access to theatrical tradition, by the end of the eighteenth-century, the impact of theatrical tradition upon an audience was less effectual as cultural anxieties heightened, which necessitated a new methodology consisting of independent study and trial and error emerged by the end of the eighteenth-century and erased the look of artificiality and convention. Siddons answered the call for originality. She uses her performative background in the provinces to undertake and position carefully chosen roles such as Lady Macbeth, marketing her offstage and onstage persona simultaneously. By marketing herself as an “unstudied” performer, she creates the illusion of authenticity—achievable only through the new methodology she uses as her new mode of studying enables her to expand and revise theatrical tradition, leading to a feel of “freshness” and authenticity.

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68 Robinson also wore a large hat for her depiction of Perdita (1782).
One of the leading critics on Siddons, Brooks, shies away from asserting that Siddons formulated a new acting technique and asserts that her success was “simply the result of a change in the way that [she] represented [her] theatrical work” (101). While I do not dispute that Siddons’ markets her theatrical work as authentic—as I have shown she does through writing, performance, and portraiture—I argue that she has, in fact, created a new mode of studying that aligns with the female intellectual movement of the eighteenth-century and revises the mid-century innovations that she, like Robinson, mastered.

Through her time in the provinces and the practice of trial and error throughout her career, Siddons uses her knowledge and experience of multiple failures to inform, perform, and perfect her onstage persona. It is her careful selection of roles that gives her the appearance of authenticity as she selects roles where she can create a hybridized persona: a blend of the domestic and of the spectacle. She shrouds herself in the feminine identity of domesticity, positioning herself as a respectable woman by highlighting her connection to her family and uses her techniques to reinforce her authenticity, which she continues to cultivate throughout her career.

While Charke, Woffington, and Robinson all experience success to varying degrees, the actresses trained in theatrical tradition focused on the effacement of themselves in character; Siddons does not. Rather, she continues to “cultivat[e] an effect of sincerity through the expression of [her] coherent personality and the portrayal of [her] authentic self,” which Brooks asserts “reveals a canny response to the prevailing cultural discourse and one which would position [Siddons] at the apex of [her] profession” (100). Siddons’ response to the prevailing cultural discourse that emphasized the potential for female rationale over emotion and directness over artifice and construction translates to a style of studying performance that uses the skills
advocated for in a revised female curriculum, which ties Siddons’ new methodology to a potentially greater movement, the revision of female education.

As women continually practiced self-studying throughout the century, Siddons cultivated the art in the provinces through her rapid learning of roles and her ability to perform in subpar characters, which strengthened her skills as an actress and allowed her to apply her observations of the classics to her everyday performances. As she intensely studies the classics just as primarily male scholars writing in commonplace books during the early eighteenth-century would have done, Siddons opens the opportunity for originality as she is able to take what she has learned and test it through trial and error to ensure her innovations produce the desired effect on her audience.

While the actresses trained in “social emulation” and effacement fail to achieve the desired effect of authenticity and continually call attention to artificiality through repeated and rehearsed roles, Siddons’ careful construction of her authentic persona dovetails with her ability to innovate. She is an actress willing to debase herself in grotesque positions to achieve the most heightened effect and it is this willingness to undertake trial and error to improve her techniques that aligns Sarah Siddons not only with prevailing discourse on female education and authenticity but also with a new theatrical mode of learning that focuses on intense self-study and uninhibited practice, leading the actress to cultivate a public celebrity that endures in addition to crafting a methodology that extends beyond the theatrical traditions passed from one generation to the next.

As actress studies is an emerging, “interdisciplinary field,” more opportunities exist for scholarship on the impact of theatrical education. By further exploring the educational beginnings of actresses, scholars can uncover shifts in theatrical innovations and responses to
changing cultural perceptions of the stage as a profession and uncover how actresses were 
wielding the power their careers afforded them to cultivate and self-fashion their own celebrities 
by drawing on techniques that they mastered and innovated through observation, imitation, 
intense self-study, and trial and error. Just as celebrities continually impact the modern world, 
the eighteenth century’s female performers had the power to access a climate of change and use 
their theatrical educations to influence a variety of mediums, blurring boundaries between the 
separateness of the sexes, challenging cultural conceptions of a woman’s place in the world, and 
determining their place and power through self-expression both in private and public realms.
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