

## **Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater**

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In her most recent publication, Felicity Nussbaum masterfully explores the relationship between the celebrated actresses of the 18th-century English stage and the changing economic and social mores of the period. While firmly grounded in historiography and theory, Nussbaum's *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* offers a compelling reinterpretation of the stage as a site of female empowerment, entrepreneurship, and cultural authority. While the locus of her argument is driven by the assertion that these women helped to establish the 18th century as the 'age of the actress' (p. 6), Nussbaum's position admittedly rests on her analysis of a small number of women who achieved 'star status' through their efforts on and off the stage. Because these women had unique access to the public sphere, money of their own, and were socially mobile, their political and cultural influence extended far beyond the physical boundaries of the stage. Indeed, the actresses who took advantage of the burgeoning cult of celebrity throughout the period inserted themselves as arbiters of taste, consumption, sexual possibilities, and national identity.

Theatre in the 18th century is popularly conceptualized as being in a state of decay, but Nussbaum's finely crafted text plainly refutes this. By drawing together contemporary accounts and impressions of, and reactions to, the popular plays and players of the age, she shows that the theatre was very much a part of the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of London life. Although it is fair to say that aspects of the theatre and theatrical performance were often as criticized as they were complimented, there is no doubt that the gossip, scandal, desire, and passion they inspired proved to be an irresistible source of entertainment to men and women from all social grades. Located at the center of this spectacle were a small number of celebrated female performers, whose bodies and voices became such influential and integral parts of the performative process that Nussbaum has uniquely suggested that their presence redefined the experience and enterprise of the theatre and theatrics over this period.

Although their European counterparts had supplanted the boy actors conventionally relied upon to portray female characters onstage at least 100 years earlier, British actresses were barred from the profession until the 1660s. Despite their protracted entry into the trade, Nussbaum demonstrates that actresses in London, and to a lesser extent in Dublin, quickly became welcome, integral, and celebrated components of the theatre and theatrical performance. In an effort to properly contextualize the remarkable rise of these star actresses,

it is instructive to note the significance of timing. In the first place, because women were unheard of upon the English stage prior to the Restoration, the meteoric careers of some star actresses can partially be attributed to the relative novelty of the experience. Moreover, in the decades following the Seven Years' War, England witnessed the widespread growth of a cult of celebrity. Thus, Nussbaum's case studies reveal that not only did actresses like Anne Oldfield and Frances Abington take advantage of the fact that their careers were beginning at the inaugural moments of celebrity, but these women were also among the 'first female subjects in the public arena' (p. 17). Therefore, this composite analysis of modernity and subjectivity examines the ways in which star actresses became economic agents, beacons of style and taste, and fashioned their own identities for public consumption.

As evidence of their talent and popularity, Nussbaum presents data from contemporary grading scales that ranked the skills and 'value' of prominent male and female tragedians and comedians alike. In one review of the 1757–8 season, actress Susannah Cibber ranked a close second to David Garrick. By 1765, a similar ranking scheme evaluated the 'talents' of 41 performers, and awarded the 3 highest scores to female players. This situation very clearly demonstrates that by mid-century, female performers were quite highly regarded by their contemporaries. These results may also help to explain, and to some degree legitimize, the professional insecurities and jealousies Garrick harboured against his female colleagues throughout his long career. Hence, through an examination of contemporary ranking tables, wills, wages, theatrical patronage, and fashion trends, Nussbaum compellingly illustrates that the theatre offered some women an exclusive and highly influential platform on which they could advance themselves, their tastes, and their politics.

While the 18th century witnessed a great deal of social and economic change, an older system of social relations continued to influence the ways in which mutually beneficial exchange relationships were formed between celebrated actresses and ladies of quality. In contrast to the decline observed in literary patronage over the century, Nussbaum argues that these client-patron relationships were very much a part of the interactive experience of the theatre. Because of the actresses' skill at emulating the behaviour and mannerisms of their patrons onstage, and their ability to dress the part, they fit in easily as invited guests at a variety of social events. Indeed, contemporaries of actress Frances Abington remarked that '(a) great number of people of fashion treat her in the most familiar manner, as if she were their equal' (p. 233). However, the motivations that governed the extension of patronage to these actresses were not simply benevolent. Because of the star-power and 'transmittable celebrity' (p. 145) of their famous friends, ladies of quality were able to share in the spotlight and cultivate their own spheres of cultural authority that were powerful enough to influence the gowns worn by their clients and the performance of particular plays. The reciprocal relationships formed between client and patron therefore represent strong evidence that social mobility was possible for a select group of women during a period that generally bore witness to a cultural backlash against active female participation in the public sphere.

Although Nussbaum's analysis is primarily concerned with the lives, careers, and legacies of the second and third generations of actresses upon the English stage, her thought-provoking text is also sensitive to the men and women who populated their public and private lives as colleagues, rivals, lovers, patrons, and spectators. While the fame or celebrity of particular actresses attracted the attention of the upper-class women in the Restoration audience, Nussbaum also elucidates that ladies of quality were not the only women in attendance at the theatre. In fact, the audience often included a fairly diverse representation of women employed in the trades as milliners, seamstresses, servants, and orange girls. Interestingly, while many of the star actresses prided themselves on their ability to count among their friends and patrons various ladies of quality, they often had much in common with the labouring women in the audience. For example, star actress Frances Abington, a pre-eminent beacon of innovative and sumptuous fashions throughout the latter half of the century, was a servant to a French milliner early in her life. Despite her humble origins, the inventor of the 'Abington cap' deftly combined the skills she acquired in her youth with her acting talent and shrewd business acumen to create a highly marketable property.

Although most modern scholarship tends to recognize the economic success of contemporary female authors over the century, Nussbaum suggests that the achievements of star actresses have been unfairly and

incorrectly marginalized. This is particularly problematic because the earning power of these actresses, through a combination of their negotiated salaries, receipts from benefit nights, and patronage, meant that their earnings generally exceeded those of many of their male counterparts. Hence, in addition to their financial mobility, these *cause célèbres* enjoyed a certain measure of independence and freedom not readily available to other groups of working or writing women. Furthermore, their achievements, financial and otherwise, are particularly important markers of modern female subjectivity. According to Nussbaum, these celebrated actresses ‘were self-reflexive economic agents who actively shaped their identities to make celebrated properties of themselves in a historical period marked by increasing privatization of property and identity’ (p. 17). In this sense, not only did these prominent thespians recognize the value and marketability of their lived and performed identities, but these ‘rival queens’ were also pioneers in the process of identity commodification and material femininity.

Although there are many fine observations drawn out throughout this work, perhaps one of the most compelling of these arguments is presented in chapter five. In ‘The actress and performative property’, Nussbaum brilliantly suggests that ‘(t)he identity of a star actress...was both public property and her own private possession’ (p. 159). In the case of Catherine (Kitty) Clive, over four decades she created a highly complex performative property, or ‘interiority effect’ (p. 152), that combined elements of her own persona with an illusion of the public self she wanted to project. In so doing, Clive used the allure and mystique of making the private accessible in the public as a marketing tool to promote her own career. While this performative property was supported by playwrights who created characters, dialogue, and epilogues to fit in with the star actress’ subjective interiority, this commodified identity, and those of her fellow actresses, were also maintained and circulated offstage through the publication of memoirs and autobiographies and the sale of benefit night tickets, costumes, and accessories. In this sense, star actresses like Clive helped to redefine who could own property and the scope of what could be considered a commodity. Hence, although there were only a handful of star actresses upon the 18th-century stage, these savvy entrepreneurs used their fame, talent, and labour to achieve degrees of cultural authority and financial independence that set the groundwork of modern female subjectivity.

In the following chapter, Nussbaum extends her argument to include the notion that gender was something that could be put on and performed. While women’s bodies were certainly on display on the stage and their femininity or sexual appeal often proved to be a useful and marketable commodity, some actresses earned celebrity and fame while wearing breeches. In the example of Irish-born Margaret (Peg) Woffington, the beautiful actress appeared as the leading lady in a number of celebrated performances, but her reputation and fame were greatly bolstered by the talent she displayed while cross-dressed. Indeed, on many occasions Woffington was praised for her seemingly effortless portrayals of Captain Macheath, Sir Harry Wildair, and a female soldier. Although it is doubtful that Woffington ‘fooled’ the audience into thinking she was really a man, the fact that the audience recognized and accepted her as a woman in men’s clothes demonstrates that the theatre was a complexly gendered space. Moreover, cross-dressed as a man, Woffington had more mobility than her female counterparts, and she used this opportunity to literally and figuratively challenge gendered divisions between public and private spaces. Whether speaking as herself or through cross-dressed characters, Woffington regularly used the epilogues written specifically for her to acknowledge women as legitimate political subjects and to inspire a sense of English national unity and patriotism. Although there were a number of contradictions between Woffington’s lived and performed identities, Nussbaum’s analysis of her storied career has dramatically called attention to the inaccuracy of historian Kathleen Wilson’s claim that at mid-century, ‘the feminine had no place in the political imaginary of the nation-state’ (p. 194). Thus, star actresses like Woffington illustrate that the feminine subject was a regular, and vocal, contributor to the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the period.

Over nine focused chapters, Nussbaum has blended biography with an analysis of theatrical performance and popular culture to successfully challenge the notion that 18th-century actresses were perennially linked to prostitution. Although a number of the celebrated actresses of the period engaged in personal and professional relationships that challenged the boundaries of respectability, these women refused to classify themselves as immoral or as whores. Through the publication of their autobiographies and memoirs, these

actresses used their commercial appeal to present their actions, however scandalous they might appear in other circles, as socially acceptable and respectable. For example, Nell Gwyn, mistress of King Charles II, was embraced in the public imagination because of her philanthropy and benevolence. Similarly, Anne Oldfield's sexual misdeeds were often overlooked because of her economic independence and renowned skill and talent upon the stage. Hence, in challenging the notion that feminine virtue was synonymous with chastity, these star actresses were instrumental in crafting public identities that laid claim to a broadly defined 'exceptional virtue' (p. 112), which could be separated from their sexual histories. These efforts at self-representation therefore depict a more porous window into the true complexity of these women's lives, which defied singular classification, and in many ways threatened the established gender hierarchy simply through the demonstration of the variety of possibilities and identities available to women.

In closing, Nussbaum's meticulous attention to detail has created a finely woven piece of scholarship that is both engaging and informative, and it is a must read for scholars across a wide range of disciplines. Throughout the narrative, she has successfully challenged a number of previously held notions regarding the vitality and cultural currency, or lack thereof, of the theatre and the continued resilience of the patronage system in the face of great economic and social change. She has also firmly established that star actresses were arbiters of style, taste, and conspicuous consumption. And perhaps most significantly, while many doors were increasingly closed to women over the course of the century, Nussbaum has effectively shown that a select group of celebrated actresses were able to use their cultural authority to argue publicly for increased social and sexual freedoms for women, and to inspire an increasingly politicized citizenry.

By harnessing their star-power and enterprising business acumen, a small number of celebrated actresses recorded annual earnings that rivaled, and in some cases surpassed, those of their male counterparts. In this way, these women used their celebrity to achieve a measure of independence, freedom, and social mobility that in a very real sense confirms Nussbaum's assertion that these actresses were among the first modern female subjects. It is also worth noting that while Nussbaum has done a masterful job recreating the cultural landscape in which these actresses lived and worked, she has not neglected their skills, talent, and dexterity in the trade. These women were indeed 'legitimate professionals' (p. 60), and Nussbaum has astutely positioned them as both labourers and artists. Despite the affluence and influence these women enjoyed however, this study has admittedly focused exclusively on the lives of exceptional and celebrated women who entertained and enthralled audiences on the stages of London and Dublin throughout the 18th century. As Nussbaum has rightly noted, the next step in this scholarly inquiry involves bringing to light the lives and experiences of the majority of women who ascended the stage, but did not achieve the fame and celebrity of their more fortunate sisters. Such an inquiry is necessary to fully reconcile the attractions and pitfalls of acting as a legitimate profession for women and to explore the ways in which the urban environment shaped the trade and expectations of people within it.

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment further.

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