The Nineteenth-Century American and British Female Public Performer: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

The article studies the division of gender roles in nineteenth-century British and American societies. It deals first with man's possession of public spaces and imprisoning of woman in the private sphere, then focuses on woman's resistance to this policy while invading man’s public zone in search for freedom and independence. The emphasis is put on woman’s religious, political and theatrical performance in the nineteenth century as features of self-expression and a translation of her desire to conquer the public world and unbind herself from the domestic sphere in which she has been confined.

Key words: nineteenth century – private – public – performance – identity - freedom
Until the first half of the nineteenth-century, American and British women had been confined into the private sphere and deprived from their natural right to move freely in the universe. Society drew frontiers for each sex and strove to preserve the ruling position for man. Empowered by his biology, man claimed that the public sphere is his realm and that woman’s place should not exceed the domestic fences. However, the second half of the nineteenth century recorded woman’s revolutionary step outside the familial world and revealed woman’s conspiracy against her self-assigned ruler. By invading the public world, woman started her quest for identity in order to regain her natural freedom and recapture her human dignity.

Starting from Lévi-Strauss’s account of the origin of the myth of difference between sexes which transforms a state of ‘nature’ into a state of ‘culture’, and going through Kate Millett’s distinction between sex, which is determined biologically, and gender, as a social concept, which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity, we can trace back the patriarchal ideology which was supported by biological determinism and which regarded female social dependency and spatial confinement as ‘natural’. According to Millett, the system’s successful pattern of oppression was due to passing itself off as nature. Woman’s biology dictates her inferiority within the male empire and places her as an inferior male. These assumptions are clearly advocated by Aristotle’s belief that ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’ and reinforced by the definition of woman by St. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Christian theologian, as an ‘imperfect man’ (Selden 134).

Woman was reduced to a physical container created for the unique purpose of bearing children. Middle-class Victorians received the wisdom of considering woman as “‘dependent, passive, the Angel in the House,” separated from public life and confined to home, marriage and morality’ (Pugh 1). Barbara Welter extracts four ‘cardinal virtues’ in the True Woman and classifies them as piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Man was considered as the worker, artist and writer par excellence whereas woman used to be the ruler of the domestic and maternal world. The Victorian sexual myth, built around the French Napoleonic Code of 1804, promoted woman’s appropriateness for the domestic sphere and advocated her alienation from the public world as if life had been breathed in her to make her subordinate to her male superior. In The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill considers that ‘All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women . . . that it is their nature, to live for others, to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections’ (27). Woman’s idealization as a superior moral virtue in the domestic sphere metamorphosed her into a grotesque creature in the masculine public world; her virtuous superiority imposed her public inferiority.

Patriarchy exerted a double physical control over woman’s body where females were not only sexually exploited, but also ‘exploited because the role of the housewife is one that all married women are expected to assume’ (Neal Ferguson 352). It was a conspiracy which aimed at marginalizing the feminine and creating what Betty Friedan describes as ‘the feminine mystique’ that welded the two exploitative modes together. In Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Margaret Fuller reserves much space to speak about woman’s entrapment in the confines of marriage in a continuous pattern of exploitation when the father ‘sells his daughter for a horse, and beats her if she runs away from her new home’ because of the belief that ‘she must marry, if it be only to find a protector, and a home of her own’ (43).
‘slavery, sex and sexuality’ (Dickenson xxix), marriage seems to provide the female subject with a sense of collective gendered identity in societal conditions which advanced man’s manipulation of women. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in an extreme position, equates marriage as a patriarchal institution with rape, saying that ‘Rape as an act of sexual violence may be viewed either as the paradigm of all heterosexual relations or as the manifestation of aggressiveness, the index of social lawlessness’ (77). She defines marriage as a ‘prolonged sexual domination by the male’ and compares it to rape which is ‘a momentary violent aberration . . . entailing the man’s responsibility for the woman’ (67). Rajan politicizes marriage to make it a means used by man to colonize woman’s body and mind. The nineteenth-century religious and political activist, Ellice Hopkins, defends a healthy marital relationship and stresses the absolute proximity of the physical and the spiritual within marriage. Hopkins condemns sexual non-reciprocity within marriage for its perpetuation of male physical abuse of women and violation of the sacramental status of the marital bond. In a study of Hopkins’s writings, Sue Morgan shows one of the strongest feminist currents in her work bearing ‘her portrayal of a sexual system where men are constantly depicted as the sexual aggressors and perpetrators of the moral destitution of women’ (213). Under the absence of emotional and spiritual communication in matrimonial ties, the man becomes a rapist and the woman a victim, using the same colonial strategies followed by the world’s most powerful political regimes.

Like gender, which is seen by feminists as a cultural concept pasted over male and female biological identity, marriage as a relationship between husband and wife is considered as a patriarchal institution which clearly maintains sexual discrimination and metaphorically stands for man’s imperialistic spirit. Caught into these social institutional cages, women were viewed as desired objects of pleasure rather than desiring subjects. The objectification of women translated man’s desire to have a self-effaced and sexless wife. Woman had to conform to the nineteenth-century ideal of the domestic paragon and be a mere non-responsive and inactive sexual partner. Thus her moral perfection resulted in her asexuality. Elizabeth Allen draws on the idea that ‘womanliness came to mean sexlessness and in the 1840s and later fiction relied on this conviction whenever it presented an ideal woman’ (31). Nineteenth-century woman should follow the type of the Virgin Mary, ‘the sexless maternal figure’ (Rajan 69), in order to enter the realm of perfection under the rule of a patriarchal Father who kept incessantly molding a whole ideology of allegorical colonization.

In order to escape sexual and domestic oppression, women preferred singlehood over heterosexual engagements and sought economic independence outside their usual sphere. Both reactions were often interrelated because of the nineteenth-century rapid economic growth where industrial capitalism weakened the patriarchal power of fathers and increased the life choices for women. Inspired by man’s very imperialistic strategies, woman made a progressive move to the outside world. In The Bonds of Womanhood, Nancy F. Cott shows how girls escaped the confines of patriarchal farm communities for independent life in cities in which they shared boarding house rooms with other girls and thus established intimate female friendships, not to say at times lesbian commitments. The search for economic independence opened the opportunities for women to forsake the male hegemony to a realm of their own. Cott declares that ‘Social and economic change included alteration of family structure, functions, and values, which affected women’s roles in manifold ways’ and describes the 1830s as ‘a turning point in women’s economic participation, public activation and social visibility’ (5-6).
Homo-sociality, devoted same-sex friendships and similar rejection of heterosexual marriage, are potentially subversive choices for women. Nineteenth-century single devotional life reflected the fashionable cult of religiosity which was used by women as a vehicle for self-empowerment. Christina Rosetti’s Maude echoes the reinstitution of religious sisterhoods in the Church of England in the nineteenth century. As a work of prose and verse which is concerned with the spiritual life of High Church women, it presents the feminist theology which seeks to reclaim a feminine voice in relationship to the Divine. The bachelorhood of sisters reinforces the idea of “undercutting the authority of a father, brother or husband in favour of the authority of a feminine equal, a “sister” (Roden 64). The choice of enclosure through a religious vocation shows that woman’s genital inaccessibility to men was political; it was an escape from heterosexual relations and consequently a defiance of man’s strategic rule of woman. The nineteenth-century sisterhoods “reversed traditional emphases of monasticism. The goal was not contemplatio, but action, activity, and involvement in and with the world” (Roden 65). George Moore’s character Evelyn Innes, in his novel Evelyn Innes (1898), goes to a convent in an effort to renounce her lover and abandon her vocal successful career. Religion and nunnery became a refuge and a means to fight man’s interference in woman’s life; it was one way to get liberated.

The search for freedom was the main factor which stimulated woman’s behavior in America and Europe. The conditions of the American woman was not unlike those of the European or English woman, especially that transatlantic voyages and immigration from Europe to the ‘Dollar land’ by the end of the American Civil War in 1865 made women live the same situation in the two worlds. Seeking liberation, political participation and economic independence, American as well as English women deserted the domestic fences of their mothers and invaded man’s public sphere in search of their true identity which had long been commanded by the policy of patriarchal societies. Politically speaking, ‘women, largely absent from all institutional sites of the public – from polling places, city councils, public offices, the newspaper rooms, and political clubs were an extreme case of the social exclusions of early American republicanism’ (Ryan 265-66). As a reaction to the negative relationship between women and the ruling political circles, feminist figures insisted on attaining public visibility and political contribution. After succeeding in launching a series of reform movements in the nineteenth century including political reform and the suffrage movements, social reform (like the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act), health reform (like the 1886 Contagious Act), moral reform (including the victimization of prostitutes, joining Christian benevolent associations, leading anti-slavery movements…), economic reform (like the first industrial strikes led by women in the United States that occurred in 1835), active feminists proved woman’s political and social maturation. Woman’s development conditioned the overthrow of the patriarchal parameters of True Womanhood. By 1835, there was only a limited number of paid occupations open to women in housework, handicrafts and industry, and school-teaching (Cott 6). Woman’s growing literacy by the 1830s opened the way for them to be journalists and fiction writers (Cott 7).

Women’s non-domestic pursuits were not limited to primary school teaching and magazines publications, but extended to public confrontations like religious preaching or political addresses or stage acting. On the religious level, and particularly during the Second Great Awakening (1790- 1840), more than one hundred women crisscrossed the country as itinerant preachers who belonged to the evangelical religious group, holding meetings in barns, schools, or fields; they were the first group of women to speak publicly in America (Brekus
After the crisis of faith caused by the rise of empiricism, positivism and Darwinism, religious movements in England like Tractarianism called for the reinstatement of lost Christian traditions of faith. Female preachers participated in the attempts of theological reconstruction, aware that ‘preaching was fundamental to its devotional practice because it was through preaching that the individual soul was reached and converted’ (Gilmour 73). The evangelical contribution to nineteenth-century culture was not only intellectual but also moral through the organization of public campaigns against slavery or child labor. Evangelicalism’s nursery of Victorian values was a point of intersection between religion and politics, the two areas in which women actively participated and concretized their reformist spirit through oral performances. In the political domain where women were asking for equal rights, including vote, many rhetoricians got up public podiums to sensitize and mobilize women. Among them, we may list Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), Kate Chopin (1850-1904), Sarah Grimke (1792-1873), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Frances Harper (1825-1911), Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), Sarah Winnemucca, Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1911), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), Fannie Barrier Williams (1855-1944), Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) ("List of Female Rhetoricians" 1).

Nineteenth-century women took part in a great variety of reform movements to improve education, to initiate prison reform, to ban alcoholic drinks, and, during the pre-Civil War period, to free the slaves when it was not considered respectable for women to speak before mixed audiences of men and women. The abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke of South Carolina who boldly spoke out against slavery at public meetings, received at least approval from some male abolitionists including William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass who supported the right of women to speak and participate equally with men in antislavery activities (“Woman’s History in America” 3). Some women like Stanton, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth drew similarities between the position of women and that of the slaves where both categories were considered as passive, devoted, and obedient (“Woman’s History in America” 4). Women’s political addresses like those of the American Mary Elizabeth Lease, a leading Populist spokeswoman in the 1880s and 1890s in Kansas who cried out for labor reforms and birth control the way Margaret Robins would do when she would lead the National Women’s Trade Union League in the early 1900s, were at a time unconventional, unusual and transgressive (“Woman’s History in America” 4). Participation in the Abolition movement taught and activated women to initiate a feminist movement to ask for their rights in society: in Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights in the United States, Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick declare that:

It was in the abolition movement that women first learned to organize, to hold public meetings, to conduct petition campaigns. As abolitionists they first won the right to speak in public and began to evolve a philosophy of their place in society and of their basic rights. For a quarter of a century the two movements, to free the slave and to liberate women, nourished and strengthened one another. (80)

Fuller shows respect for the woman who challenged sterile conditions of domesticity and True Womanhood for the sake of her emancipation: ‘As to her home, she is not likely to leave it more than she now does for balls, theatres, meetings for promoting missions . . . in hope of an animation for her existence’ (19). In the political field, Fuller cites many examples of feminist activists like the rigorous Angelina Grimke and Abby Kelly, those abolitionists who, though they received some approval, encountered hostility from some of their male peers:
Women who speak in public, if they have a moral power, such as has been felt from Angelina Grimke and Abby Kelly; that is, if they speak for conscience’s sake to serve a cause which they hold sacred, invariably subdue the prejudices of their hearers, and excite an interest proportionate to the aversion with which it had been the purpose to regard them. (72)

Fuller quotes a snatch of Kelly’s polemic in the Town-House to show her moral power and linguistic skill, a skill which is a reminder of Verena Tarrant’s while delivering feminist speeches in political meetings:

[T]he scene was not unheroic – to see that woman, true to humanity and her own nature, a centre of rude eyes and tongues, even gentlemen feeling licensed to make part of a species of mob around a female out of her sphere... She acted like a gentle hero, with her mild decision and womanly calmness. (72)

Woman’s voice reached the public not only through oral addresses and sermons but also through written material. Female novelists conveyed their feminist and reformist messages through setting, characterization and style. Their call for independence and struggle for freedom were mediated by their public texts which could fulfill the mission of public addresses because of their required publicity. In Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America, Mary Kelly examines the American history of women and analyzes the conflict between woman’s compulsory domesticity or ‘privacy’ and her needed ‘publicity’ as a novelist where she strove to reconcile public recognition with private domesticity. If Kelly presents the conditions of the woman novelist as a public figure in the nineteenth century, Tracy Davis surveys the milieu of the Victorian woman and studies woman’s public professions as actresses in her book Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture.

Written productions and direct oral addresses were woman’s mediums to imperialize man’s public zones. Invading the theatrical space by woman was symbolic enough to show that the stage is not exclusively a male area but rather open to the two sexes to display their artistic faculties. Tracy Davis provides data about women’s rising involvement in theatrical activities, sustained by figures dating back to nineteenth-century statistics and manuscript censuses. She explains the historical conditions that hastened woman’s access to the public sphere by focusing on the demographic female surplus that left women without marriage and urged their search for livelihoods in trade. Demographic data mixed with the change of the dramatic repertoire permitted the stage to absorb female recruits in growing numbers. Since the way was paved by religious preachers and political orators, women did not find it odd to make public confrontation with stage audiences. Performance, including non-dramatic activities, was a new employment field for women; Davis states:

[T]he broadest spectrum of performing specialties that comes under the rubric of ‘actor’ as the term was colloquially understood in the nineteenth century: including, in other words, specialties that range from tragedienne to danseuse, marionette manipulator to serio Vocalist, Negro comedian to patentee, and equestrian artiste to heavy villain. (40)

The stage ceased to be forbidden to women and controlled uniquely by males; it became a dwelling place for men and women whose genius required publicity. In her article ‘The Voice of Freedom: Images of the Prima Donna’, Susan Rutherford reads the figure of the nineteenth- century ‘prima donna’ as an embodiment of woman’s longing for release from patriarchal manacles. She describes her voice as a voice of freedom, symbol of liberation and a positive expression of female independence, individuality and artistry. Helen Day’s essay
entitled ‘Female Daredevils’ stresses the dexterity in the nineteenth-century female public performances as daredevils, parachutists and balloonists.

Woman’s appearance on the stage and her public meeting with a male audience signaled her reactionary departure from male monarchy in which she used to be excluded from any intellectual, artistic or public activity. Her former invisibility was replaced by an increasing involvement in the world of art. In 1841, there were about three actors to each actress, two to one in 1851 and by 1891 actresses were in the majority (Gardner 8). Formerly, men’s enactment of women’s roles was a theatrical habit which had been perpetuated till the seventeenth century (Van Den Abeele 7). Women were forbidden from public appearance and seen as incompetent for theatrical performance, a fact which contributed to the subjugation of women. ‘Classical plays and theatrical conventions,’ maintains Sue-Ellen Case, ‘can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production’ (7). By the nineteenth century, the theatrical tradition of playing woman by male actors in drag was not only quitted but sometimes reversed where the audience was surprised by considerable number of ‘female Hamlets’ on the stage, for instance. In 1851, Charlotte Cushman played Hamlet, and in 1861 in England Alice Marriott also did. These actresses, who dressed in male costumes and who fought heroically, succeeded in adopting masculinity and performed their roles adequately. Jill Edmonds in ‘Princess Hamlet’ declares that ‘No female role in Shakespeare could provide such opportunity for physical action’ (70).

Acting male roles while using male attire emphasized a masculinized sexuality which could be headed under what Kristen Pullen called ‘dress reform’ that involved ‘the spectre of the masculine woman’ who adopted male clothes to threaten the power of the phallus (120). Replacing man on the stage announced woman’s desire for a male-free world, a world of her own where she would be the ruler. Cross-dressed or transvestite females challenged the hierarchical and stylized male world whose ‘obsessive use of sex-connected costumes’ is ‘a pattern based upon gender distinctions’ (Gilbert, 161). The rebellious spirit of the nineteenth-century liberal woman initiated the radicalism that has affected modern feminist thought, in one way to declare that ‘no one, male or female, can or should be confined to a uni-form, a single form or self’ while seeking to ‘outline the enduring, gender-connected myths behind history’ (Gilbert, “Costumes” 162). Nineteenth-century actresses’ transvestism contributed to the creation of an age free of gender-based principles through the metaphorical use of male costumes in public.

Actresses exhibited their performing power with liberty and their physical mobility was granted. In her article about the French performer Yvette Guilbert, Geraldine Harris describes her as an example of the liberal woman who freely moved between France and London to perform her chansons. Although written in Parisian slang which was not comprehensible for English audience, her songs received a great success in London due to her attractive presence and adept performance on the stage. Harris records Maurice Donnay’s words which describe the fin-de-siècle liberal atmosphere: ‘And in 1890 there were in ideas and morals, an ease and freedom which we found very new. We breathed the air of liberty’ (121). Similarly Sarah Blackstone in ‘Women Writing Melodrama’ cites an example of an active and mobile actress/singer of the period, Genevieve Ward, who performed the sensational melodrama Forget Me Not (which she first presented in 1879) more than two thousand times during her career, making the heroine Stephanie her signature role (26-7).
Throughout George C.D. Odell’s *Annals of the New York Stage*, Ward was praised as ‘impressive,’ ‘an admirable actress,’ ‘excellent as always in the role’ (qtd. in Blackstone 27).

Actresses reached fame, success and made wealth from their valiant appearance on public stages which ‘could provide a higher wage than any other legitimate occupation freely accessible to a woman’ (Tracy Davis 53). Actresses’ financial situation was far better than lower paid non-dramatic specialties like ballet dancers, aerial faeries, pantom choristers, extravaganza supernumeraries and burlesque performers (Tracy Davis 48). Certain historical figures in the acting domain won an intercontinental popularity due to their performances on London, French and other theaters, though they came from different nationalities; among them we may list: Marie Bancroft, Julia Bartet, Kate Josephine Bateman (Mrs Crowe), Sarah Bernhardt, Madeline Brohan, Mrs Partick Campbell, Céline Celeste, Marie Céline Chaumont, Mary Jane Chippendale, Annie Clarke (Boston), Kate Claxton, Sophie Croizette (Russia), Marie de la Porte, Aimée Desclée, Doche (Paris), Dudley, Duse, Nellie Farren (Liverpool), Marie Favart, Lydia Foote, Anna Judic, Clara Morris, Plessy, Ristori, Elizabeth Robins, Rousby, Lydia Thompson, Annie Webster and Mrs John Wood. Those female stars took advantage of their gifts to invade the public world and overcome a history of female silence. Their use of the stage was rather political since it served to ‘challenge and subvert the prevailing male hegemony’ (Gardner 1).

Stage women were not limited to performing activities but expanded their wings to management where they appeared side-to-side with male managers to ‘constitute a significant challenge to the traditional notions of woman’s place’ (Gardner 10). From the earliest part of the century, the women of London theater like Eliza Vestis and Fanny Kemble were ‘equal to their male contemporaries in popularity and the management of their business affairs’ (Gardner 10). Tracy Davis listed many women managers of the period like Mrs Wild (who owned a travelling theater in Yorkshire and Lancashire, 1820-51), Mrs Nye Chart (at the Theatre Royal Brighton, 1876-92), Ellen Poole (at the Alexandra Theater Liverpool, 1883-88), Lillie Langtry who was a lessee at the St James’s (1890), preferring to make her fortune in America, and others like Kate Santley or Emma Conus (51-2). There were cases of widow managers like Sarah Lane who succeeded her husband at the Britannia and ran the theater from 1871 to 1899 or Sarah Baker, in London provinces, one of the most successful managers at the beginning of the nineteenth century who proved to be socially self-reliant and financially independent and self-sustaining. Whether managers or stage performers, independent women took power and legalization from a number of reform acts such as the 1882 Married Woman’s Property Act which allowed women to own and administer their own property and the 1889 Women’s Trade Union League. The Free Theater movement had originated on the continent between 1880s and 1890s; it began in England with Ibsen’s plays which attracted many women actresses like Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington’s. *A Doll’s House* (1889) and *Hedda Gabler* (1891) were enacted as private performances by women (Gardner 11).

Foundations of schools of acting by women marked the evolutionary spirit of the era as promoted by the Fabian Society where they progressively changed from simple trainees to managers and dramatists, then to expert trainers and masters of art. Sarah Thorne not only ran the Margate Theatre Royal between 1867 and 1899, but also pioneered in the establishment of a respected school of acting to attract the ‘ladies and gentlemen’ wishing to enter the theatrical profession (Gardner 10-11). The students of Sarah Thorne appeared as successful managers and actresses such as Marion Lea, Gertrude Kingston at the beginning of the
twentieth century together with Olga Nethersole, Lillah McCarthy who were actresses known to have been involved in the Little Theater Movement and ran it before the First World War. The feminist work in the domain of acting and stagecraft was embodied in the foundation of The Actresses Franchise League in 1908 ‘with its policy of performances in support of the campaign for votes of women’ (Gardner 12). The Fabian tendency of female performers took its shape in the foundation of Fabian Women’s Group in 1908, formed within the Ibsenite milieu. Woman’s involvement in art, writing and acting, was equally recorded in both England and America because ‘women pioneered their way west on an equal footing with the men and out of sheer necessity discarded any pretence of “femininity”’ (Ferris 42).

Women’s invasion of the stage was a means to exteriorize their latent skills, exhibit their artistic power and concretize their potentialities in a process of subversion of all previous pre-assumptions on woman’s inaptitude in the domain of art. Feminist theater is based on the urge to politicize sexuality where woman’s performance ‘deconstructs sexual difference and thus undermines patriarchal power’ (Keyssar 1). The stage becomes a location where the female voice can be heard; it offers ‘a “place from which to speak” in which men can be at home in public’ (Kruger 68). Fuller admits woman’s creative power as a public preacher or performer when she says:

As to the possibility of her filling with grace and dignity, any such position, we should think those who had seen the great actresses, and heard the Quaker preachers of modern times, would not doubt that woman can express publicly the fullness of thought and creation, without losing any of the peculiar beauty of her sex. (19)

By displaying creative powers on the theatrical imperializing space, women of genius proved that they were no longer passive, emotional and domestic angels but rather sensible, clever and active competitors to men; they made an assault on a public spot of power from which symbolic imperialism might efficiently function in favor of woman’s new social and political position.

However, despite women’s endeavor for a better social and professional position, sexual inequity persisted in society which received actresses and public performers with contempt and humiliation, within the frame of male’s policy of exclusion. Fuller transmits the Victorian masculine reaction towards woman’s transcendence of domestic confines, saying that ‘the world repels them more rudely, and they are of weaker bodily frame’ (67). In spite of woman’s acknowledged artistic skills, her public presence was not accepted by Victorians who still based their ideology on woman’s ‘natural’ inferiority. Fuller also records the drawbacks of actresses’ engagement in marital ties: ‘Woe to such a woman who finds herself linked to such a man in bonds too close. It is the cruelest of errors. He will detest her with all the bitterness of wounded self-love. He will take the whole prejudice of manhood upon himself. . . . Such women are the great actresses, the songsters’ (67).

Society functioned as a handicap in the face of the great female talents and placed itself ‘against the flowering genius, artistic “dispersion”, the cultivation of intellectual or artistic pursuits’ (Perosa 40) in order to preserve its code of behavior and to eschew the roots that may threaten the masculine prerogative. Victorians ‘were deeply suspicious of women whose livelihood depended on skills of deception and dissembling, and the circumstances of actresses work belied any pretences to sexual naiveté, middle-class immobility, or feeble brain power’ (Tracy Davis 53). The resistance to the contemporary stream of female public exhibitionists took place between 1820 and 1860 when a range of printed material promoted
and prescribed the cult of True Womanhood, as man’s new strategy of re-possessing his space. Religious figures were attempting to re-instill feminine ideals through public lectures and sermons to stop the stream of ‘publicity’ among women.

In literature, the challenge to modernity was embodied in the production of many theological writings, as surveyed by Robin Gilmour. He studies the works of Matthew Arnold who published four volumes of religious books in the 1870s including *Literature and Dogma* (1873). In the book, Arnold calls for an undogmatic reading of the literary language of the Bible so as to redeem the Crisis of Faith caused by the failure of supernatural dogmatic Christianity in an age of reason, skepticism and experientialism. He intends to make the Christian ethic stronger than dogmatic theology. Arnold’s writings were followed by agnosticism in its promotion of ethics and morality, even without religion. Ethical Societies grew up, mostly in London, ‘to provide communities of the like-minded where rationalists and philosophical Idealists could meet to hear lay sermons and debate moral and religious issues’ (Gilmour 106). These reformist trends, which challenged modernity in general and woman’s reactionary imperialist policy in particular, including her ascent to the stage, shape a continuum with Rousseau’s philosophical negative view towards theater as a public distracting space and female acting as an embodiment of corrupted morality. Women, on the other hand, neglected that type of moral reform, declined the recall to social conventions and refused to step back into the dark ages of patriarchy while sticking to their new liberal spirit and insisting on the necessity of their public presence.

Although the majority of women working for the theater shared a renunciation of social, religious and cultural summons to feminine ‘virtue’, a group of women writers of early American comedies feared the strong anti-theatrical attitudes that were based on religious and cultural opposition to women’s public activities. They assured ‘a highly didactic tone and focus[ed] closely on issues of national identity’ in order to avoid ‘counter anti-theatricalism, or perhaps merely to address unsophisticated audiences,’ as Amelia Kritzer maintains (3). Those female writers displayed an ironic internalization of old values which kept rooted inside female thought. Written by the American playwright Anna Cora Ogden in 1845, *Fashion* is a play that reflects ‘a more conservative vision of American womanhood through its confinement of women within domestic scenes and its idealization of feminine passivity’ (Kritzer 18). As modern and liberal women, actresses were themselves used by both male and female playwrights to critique what they called the ‘New Woman’ within the context of male’s plan of attacking woman’s new imperialist policy. Gardner speaks about the irony produced when ‘this unconventional world [female theatrical activity] was the purveyor of some of the most conventional—not to say reactionary—attitudes towards women in the period’ (8). Some playwrights reproduced the antagonistic iconography of the prevailing ideology while using women against themselves. We can apply at this level Barbara Freedman’s description of the modern theater as falling into the ‘process of saving itself by denying itself’ (82).

Actresses often performed roles that clashed with their own search for liberation like the roles we find in Pinero’s *The Amazons*, Henry Arthur Jones’s *The Case of Rebellious Susan* and Sydney Grundy’s *The New Woman*. Case condemns the culture that wittingly used the women of theater against themselves:

As a result of the suppression of real women, the culture invented its own representation of the gender, and it was this fictional ‘Woman’ who appeared on the stage, in the myths and in the
plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women. (7)

These types of women collaborate with patriarchy to reinforce their own suppression. The example of Grundy’s play *The New Woman* embodies the idea of exploiting female actresses to attack female liberation, though written by a woman. The comedy presented its audience with two versions of the New Woman: the caricature who is a grotesque, and a serious woman, Mrs Sylvester. The play, along with its poster which showed a young woman in black sitting in front of a large latchkey with a smoldering cigarette in the margins, expressed hostility to the whole notion of the New Woman (Gardner 2-3). The irony springs from the dichotomy between the goals of the play and the real identity of the actresses who are the object of critique. Gardner echoes the social view of the New Woman by Victorians:

[She] was seen typically as young, middle class and single on principle. She eschewed the fripperies of fashion in favour of more masculine dress and severe coiffure. . . and was certainly a devotee of Ibsen and given to reading ‘advanced’ books. She was financially independent of father or husband. . . She affects emancipating habits, like smoking, riding a bicycle, using bold language and taking the omnibus or train unescorted. (4-5)

Notwithstanding the political motives of female public participation, the identity of performers or actresses had neatly fit into the category of the public woman or prostitute. Society provided two female types: the idealized domestic true woman and the vilified prostitute or false woman. The whore was the anti-thesis of the wife and was usually described as a temptress, a dark woman fraught with evil. Performers’ defiance of passive middle-class femininity and realization of economic self-sufficiency through public visibility ‘led to persistent and empirically unfounded prejudices and very real sexual dangers in their work places’ (Tracy Davis xiv). Social respectability was denied because of their public exposure and eroticized female form. According to Maria-Elena Buszek, what stirred more the equation of performers with prostitutes was the appearance of photographic imagery which promoted sexualized theatrical identities outside the contained space of theater where female performers shifted from the stage to mass media and popular culture. In 1853, the Photographic Society was formed in London under the Queen’s reign to become ‘the most characteristic of Victorian media: it brought together science and art in a novel way, was realistic, inescapably contemporary, incipiently democratic, and promised victory over the Time. Spirit which haunted the age’ (Gilmour 218). In Europe, a visual display of the female performer whether a dancer or actress was associated with the same display and commercial exchange of the prostitute as having a profession. The burlesque tradition and photographic pin-ups originated in the mid-nineteenth century to make female performers explore pointedly sexual roles on and off-stage and the early carte de visite pin-ups of bawdy burlesque actresses were a strategic feminist use.

The establishment of the pin-up genre defined the manipulation of its viewers/consumers by its “awarish” or sexually self-aware, representational subjects’ (Buszek 2). Self-aware female sexuality was not only imaged but liable for live display. Through feminized spectacles, sexuality seems to be of a ‘performativae nature,’ for actresses consciously created fantasy characters for their viewers (Pullen 134). Their deliberate bodily display and their physical possession of the theatrical space can be read as subversions of old oppressive cultural mores and substitutions for patriarchy’s repression of woman’s sexual desire. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault questions the ‘repressive hypothesis,’ which asserts that since the nineteenth century, Western societies have sought to repress
human sexuality, showing that what we think of as repression of sexuality actually constituted the essence of our identities and produced a profusion of discourse on the subject. He argues that the regulating discourse of the last two centuries produces rather than represses sexuality. He considers prostitution and psychiatry as outlets of confession to release the repressed sexual feelings. Thus it is possible to say that woman’s premeditated physical exposure argued for her active sexuality, exteriorized her sexual potentialities and made her a manipulator of man’s desire. Buszek echoes M.G. Lord’s definition of pornographic imagery as ‘an unruly force that promises to unsettle social conventions and [serves as] a radical political act.’ Performers were self-consciously erotic, taking pleasure in their own beauty while reconstructing their sexual identities through the discovery of their sexuality. Women’s celebration of their female corporeality destroyed the tradition of the asexual Angel in the House and challenged the contemporary didacticism of evangelicalism and Tractarianism which were teaching the Victorians ‘to hate their own flesh.’ (Gilmour 86).

Nonetheless, the confusion between the stereotype of the actress and the courtesan was held in an agitated societal atmosphere, not seeing the reactionary side but imbued with feelings of disdain for these female performers. Like prostitution, theatrical activity was seen as a profession granting a primary source income in return for the physical selling of the self. The association of the theater with prostitution was even more firmly established in the United States where the nation’s puritanical origins influenced the perception of performance and its entailing immorality and associated theater with sexual display. The American theater was criticized for offering the space for crimes of exhibitionism and prostitution. Both occupations often overlapped to give birth to the theatrical tradition of the actress-courtesan. Lora Pearl, a famous London courtesan of nineteenth-century demi-monde embarked on a theatrical carrier. The opposite also happened when performers turned into courtesans like the alteration of Lola Montez, the eastern American dancer and performer (1851), into a recognized courtesan. This moral transformation was a historical result of the rise of prostitution in the nineteenth century where 84 out of 168 had become prostitutes (Brian 4).

As a result of the spreading out of prostitution which was confused with female acting, a trend of female reformers strove to put an end to such a ‘dishonorable’ profession. In 1894, a group of middle-class Christian women intended to seek out and expel prostitutes from London music halls ‘for their promotion of morally dubious entertainment’ (Morgan 209). Evangelical campaigns were arranged for Social Purity Movement whose defining feature was ‘its attempt to infuse society with a level of sexual respectability through the mass dissemination of perspective moral literature’ (Morgan 211). Yet female purists themselves were repelled by puritanical severity because they articulated rigorous debates on sexual matters. The movement differed from the traditional Christian view of the sinful lifestyle. Some pious women like Ellice Hopkins called for public discussions on sexuality and accused the Anglican church of the contribution to the trouble of the century for keeping silent on the subject (Morgan 210). Although Hopkins endeavored to stop prostitution, she defended prostitutes as victims of male sexual abuse within society.

The Victorian society judged liberated female performers from two paradoxical points of view. From a negative social, religious and cultural view, they were equated with prostitutes, but from the affirmative political and feminist perspective, public performers signified transgression, independence and self-realization. Tracy Davis writes of this subversive identity of the nineteenth-century actresses and clarifies the view of society towards them:
Actresses were symbols of women’s self-sufficiency and independence, but as such they were doubly threatening: like the middle classes generally, they advocated and embodied hard work, education, culture, and family ties, yet unlike prostitutes they were regarded as ‘proper’ vessels of physical and sexual beauty and legitimately moved in society as attractive and desirable beings. (69)

Though appreciated and desired, female performers remained the emblem of immorality and illegal sexuality. There were fans of actresses who admired their physical magnetism and feminine presence on the stage but perhaps without consideration of their political intentions and estimation of their struggle for emancipation, with the exception of some cultural forms, especially literature, which sometimes show recognition of the female endeavor to overcome patriarchal conventions. In drama, writers like Shaw and Barker ‘created idealised, independent, self-determining women –Vivie Warren in Mrs Warren’s Profession and Marion Yates in The Madras House’ (Gardner 9).

The Victorian classification of women into two types, the pious and respectful lady and the immoral and public whore is applicable on actresses themselves where a clear distinction between virtuous performers and actresses-courtesans was perceivable. Some actresses like Jenny Lind and the Italian Adelaide Ristori tended to construct a favorable image of woman’s talents. Their on and off-screen star images denied the sexualized identity produced in actresses/ courtesans scandalous photographs. Buszek declares that ‘[t]heir identities asserted the potential of the true woman to exist in the sphere of the theater as in the home.’ The charming portraiture of Lind and Ristori’s style of performance as a venerable antique character epitomized true womanhood yet outside the domestic sphere (Buszek 10).

The fashionable New Woman of the time who offered a subversive public identity sustained by her hunger for independence and self-reliance was threatened to undergo a process of self-destruction or an entry into a new cycle of passivity, and passivity in the theater was not unlike the one lived under patriarchy. As a latent complicit with patriarchy, capitalism was a new manipulator of women. It, at the same time, drew women from their private dwellings and used them as objects for materialistic ends where ‘[o]n stage and backstage theatres became analogous to the industrialized factory’ as in textile and heavy manufacturing trades (Tracy Davis 48). Thinking they were liberated and saved from the patriarchal constraints, women were unconsciously incarcerated by capitalist shackles. The pin-ups of the bawdy burlesque actresses were associated with mass reproduction, distribution and consumption. Attracted more the bourgeois audiences, these pin-ups promoted a boom of leg show productions in the United States. ‘The free trade in spoken drama (dating from the theatre of Regulation Act of 1843),’ affirms Tracy Davis, ‘took control of the theatrical industry from the hands of a few and made licenses available to unlimited numbers of small and large scale entrepreneurial managers’ (6). In 1860, Laura Keene, a female dramatist and theater manager, sought to draw larger audiences to her ‘women’s plays’ to legitimate theatrical spaces in the United States away from the working-class burlesque halls and concert saloons of New York City in the aim of industrializing live entertainment (Buszek 5). Other playwrights characterized their plays with social and moral transgressiveness like Lord Byron’s plays Mazeppa and The Black Crook which showed undressed performers at Niblo’s Garden. Lydia Thompson’s play British Blondes (performed in New York in 1868) with its dyed-haired and disrespectfully-dressed prostitutes indicated that ‘the appeal of [the play] lay in their legs and light golden hair’ (Pullen 119) Such nineteenth-century burlesque plays echoed woman’s hysteria on and off stage while ‘overlapping tensions about theatre, fashion, feminism and female sexuality’ (Pullen 133).
While some plays were inscribed within the laws of the capitalist system, others attacked it in the hope of creating a Fabian socialist system. The engagement of feminism with socialism aimed at liberating women from the hands of capitalism. Women’s freedom was thought to be a direct result of economic liberation within a transformed economic and social system (Jill Davis 18). Many female actresses as well as feminist and anti-capitalist dramatists were aware of the exploitative nature of capitalism and its conspiracy with patriarchy against women. Shaw’s play, *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1894) argues that the origin of prostitution is economic by making the prostitute Mrs Warren choose prostitution over other forms of sex slavery. Prostitution is presented by Shaw as an economic and social phenomenon caught by the unclean hands of capitalism. On the tongue of his characters, Shaw condemns the system when, for example, Praed says to Vivie: ‘What a monstrous, wicked, rascally system! I knew it! I felt at once that it meant destroying all that makes womanhood beautiful.’ (217). Despite that cultural attack on capitalism which aimed at resisting the features of inequality in society including woman’s oppression, liberated women who thought themselves freed from the male world when they conquered man’s public sphere were caught in another form of slavery. Public performers were usually seen by a male audience who repossessed and enslaved them by their gaze. Relying on the Fanonian identification of the gaze as a force of fixation, we can assume that performers are consumed by the other where they do not represent the desiring eye but rather the blinded or the desired eye to fall once again in the pits of patriarchal subjugation. Barbara Freedman explores the functioning of the spectatorial gaze, saying: ‘Since the male is traditionally envisioned as the bearer of the gaze the woman represented as the fetishised object of the gaze […] the classic cinematic gaze spils us into male (voyeur) and female (exhibitionist)” (84).

Yet, the duality of voyeurism and exhibitionism may not function if we consider that the gaze does not fixate the real woman on the stage but rather the character that she represents in the play. The performer sometimes wears a mask to render her role, it is a mask which announces that ‘the “I” is always already another; its characters assure us of their displacement’ (Barbara Freedman 102). The actress’s performance deconstructs and displaces her identity while constructing and placing another subjectivity which will be the object of the gaze. The real performer can thus escape being manipulated and become herself the manipulator. Freedman calls for the actor’s gaze as a substitute for the spectatorial gaze: ‘We seek in theater, that moment when our looking is no longer a looking (as in film), but a being seen, a return of the look by the mirror image which denies the process’ (99). Unlike cinema, the theater provides the actress with the possibility of returning a look that can control spectatorship. The actress’s constitutive gaze is a reformulation of subjectivity and can never be applied without awareness that she is seen. Though formally liberated, woman should possess the Lady of Shalott’s mirror, not for self-reflection but to watch herself being looked at. Escaping manipulation was a complex and slippery process where woman had to be endowed with an extraordinary intelligence and filled with a complete awareness of the system’s tricks of entrapment so as to overcome them. In *Feminist Movement*, Ethel Snawden argues that ‘women’s achievement of equality is dependent upon the overthrow of capitalism’ (qtd. in Neal Ferguson 347).

Distinctions between the real identities of actresses and their performed roles in plays were dissolved by the audience who thought itself in possession of the stage actresses and who went to theater to ‘sit silently in the protective darkness and fulfill [their] role as sanctioned voyeurs’ (Barbara Freedman 79). Capitalism interfered once again with the quality
of the audience who was allowed to watch plays. Elitism of public reception made actresses preys to the capitalist system anew. The theater’s collapse into private spectatorship (male, bourgeois, middle, educated class) made female actresses display their individual talents for the exemplary audience. What was criticized is that the political dimension of woman’s public participations was not always seized by the spectator, who was more attracted to the entertaining side of theater. Therefore, the new woman’s policy can be said to be double-edged; it could re-install the patriarchal principles as it could create an effective counter movement against man’s colonization of the public sphere. Woman’s new invading policy was surrounded by dangers which could make her lose the war and re-assert man’s sovereignty.
Endnotes

1 “The feminine mystique” refers to woman’s domestic world which made her confined to her own body and beauty, and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home.

2 Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) is an English poet who wrote romantic, devotional and children’s poems. She also wrote prose including short fiction and devotional works. She was deeply interested in the Anglo-Catholic movement that developed in the Church of England.

3 Since 1848, women had discussed suffrage: in the U.S. Woman’s suffrage movement was launched by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York.

4 The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act allowed divorce through the law courts, instead of the slow and expensive business of a Private Act of Parliament. The wife had to prove her husband had committed adultery, incest, bigamy, cruelty or desertion.

5 The 1886 Contagious Act legalized the forcible medical examination of prostitutes.

6 Tractarianism or Oxford movement (1833 – 1845) is a movement which developed within the Church of England to emphasize the church’s Catholic inheritance and to defend it as a divine institution against the threats of liberal theology, rationalism, and government interference. (‘Oxford Movement’, Britannica Concise Encyclopedia).

7 Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) is an English poet and cultural critic. He instructs the readers on contemporary social issues and presents critiques to the spirit of his age. He rejects the superstitious elements in religion while retaining a fascination for church rituals. His works are more concerned with virtues and values than with theistic matters.

8 See Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s essay entitled “Letter to D’Alembert on the Theatre” (1758) which was written to object to the establishment of a theater in Geneva and related the issue to the broader social context. In the letter, he warns of the potential of the theater to corrupt the morality in society while focusing on the belief in the natural order and harmony of traditional sex roles. He claims that the theater is a threat to an ideal and natural style of living and argues that its amusing aspect distracts people from hard work. He describes actresses as scandalous and indecent. In general, he believes that the presence of women in public spaces corrupts the youth and causes their effeminacy and lack of patriotism.

9 The concept, echoing the name of Sydney Grundy’s play in 1894, was coined to describe the modern liberal woman and to refer to the subversion of the female norm in nineteenth-century theatrical activity. Yet the term is not limited to the 1890s. It first appeared in France in 1832 as a title of a feminist newspaper (La Femme Nouvelle).

10 Grundy’s play The New Woman opened at the Comedy Theater on 1 September 1894.
References


